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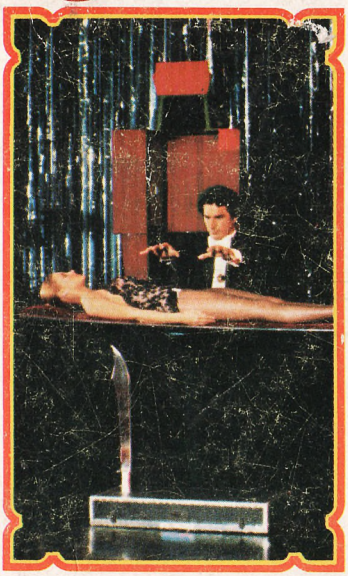
The world's last true magician uses his powerful mastery of the occult to find—and stop—the madman who's threatening to destroy the world.

Mandrake The Magician



by Howard Ashman

Based on the NBC-TV movie.

BY THE ETERNAL POWERS OF THERON THE MASTER!

Like robots, the two gunmen simultaneously raised their weapons and aimed. As their eyes went up to a dead-level firing position, Mandrake touched the amulet around his neck.

"By the eternal powers of Theron the Master!"

The barely audible words were no sooner out than the gunmen heard a truly terrible sound, like the angry roar of a wild beast.

A second later it registered. A sleek Bengal tiger was stalking them, its deadly jaws open in regal menace, its muscles poised to spring for the kill.

MANDRAKE THE MAGICIAN

by Howard Ashman

based on a screenplay by Rick Husky

A Tempo Star Book

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I

The sorcerer sat in his cold stone chamber. Outside, the Tibetan wind howled. Inside, the magician would allow himself no fire. Deep in meditation, he felt neither heat nor cold. In his mind, ancient chants repeated themselves as pictures formed. Pictures.

A large steel bird. It flew through clouds but could not find its way out of them. An airplane. American. Lost. The image faded and a new one took its place. The face of the old man who had taught him.

"We are at an end, Theron." The magician heard the voice of his ancient Master. How long had the Great One been gone? Twenty years? Thirty? Time was as nothing before his wisdom. And now the teacher, long dead, spoke to Theron once again.

"We are at an end. Our race of magicians will soon be extinct. You, Theron, carry well the secrets that I taught you. But when you die, as all men must, my secrets die with you. The world has moved away from us. We who were called Wizards have outlived our time on earth." The image of the old one faded.

Theron touched the golden amulet around his neck. The small gold disk inscribed with symbols was the only ornament he had ever worn. He had come to the lamasery as a boy. Here he had been raised and schooled in the mysteries.

He looked down at his hands, at the gray veins running like rivers, carrying life and knowledge to every

part of his aged body. He felt full of life yet. Full of knowledge.

The image came again. Airplane. American. And this time, Theron looked inside it.

"Lousy way to spend Christmas. I'm sorry, son." The dark-haired pilot spoke to the eight-year-old boy who huddled beside him, eyes wide. He would never forgive himself for bringing the kid on a trip like this.

It had been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, this chance to do a photo essay on Tibet. And the money had sounded great. But the opportunity had presented itself at the wrong time of year. How do you leave a kid alone at Christmastime? Especially when his mother had died just one year before? You don't. You take him with you on the adventure. And here they were.

"We'll make it, son. I promise." He did not tell him that the gasoline was all but gone. That he knew this single engine plane would soon become their flying coffin.

Theron stood in a corner of his cold stone cell. He touched the amulet and extended his arms in an ancient gesture, calling on the master's soul for guidance.

"Must we be marked for extinction, O Wise One? Must we disappear without a trace? May we leave *no* legacy behind?"

No answer came back but the howling wind, the screaming, freezing mountain wind. The door to the cell flew open. Another Chinese monk, younger than Theron, stood in the doorway.

"A plane has crashed, Master Theron." The young monk paused and searched the old man's face. "It is not three miles from here. Shall we go?"

Theron closed his eyes. He stroked his beard and let what images would come be welcome.

And there it was. The image of the boy in the airplane.

The dark-haired child with inquisitive, receptive eyes. The answer to his question. The boy.

"Yes," said Theron gravely. "Take Wu and Chiang with you. Go to the place where the plane has fallen. The pilot is dead. Bury him. The young boy is alive. Bring him to me."

The boy's first sight when he awoke was somewhat disconcerting. An ancient, yellow hand was extended before him, palm up. The hand—gnarled and cracked—was empty. The boy stared at its hardened, parchmentlike skin, and at the deep puckered lines of the palm.

And suddenly a bowl was in the hand. No one had put it there. It had just appeared, had just . . . materialized out of thin air. Soup. The boy reached for its steaming warmth, realizing at once that he was very hungry. He took the bowl and began to gulp the rich broth it held without even looking up to see the face of the man who had offered it.

When the soup was gone, the boy heard laughter. Now he looked up. The face hovering over him was the kindest he had ever seen. Its mouth, framed by a long white beard, was bent into a loving, fatherly smile. As the boy looked into the soft, clear eyes, Theron spoke.

"All memories are leaving you. The nightmare in the plane. Your mother's death. The face of your father. All memories of your years 'til now are fading from your mind. You are reborn."

The boy just continued to stare into the gentle calm eyes of the old man. He felt warm. He felt healthy. A scent of incense wafted by. A faint jingling of chimes, like slivers of glass clinking against each other in the wind, filled the air. The boy had never known such contentment. His other life began to slip away.

Theron took three steps backward, touched his golden amulet, and raised one arm in a majestic gesture.

A flash of light blinded the boy for a moment. When his eyes had adjusted to the blinding glare, they could not believe what they saw.

A brown and white pony was standing beside Theron. A palomino. Just like the one—

"I can make all of your wishes come true," said Theron with a smile. The magician raised his arm again and there was a second blinding flash of light. When the boy's eyes had adjusted again, the pony was gone.

"But I will not." Theron touched the boy on the shoulder. "I will give you the power to make them come true yourself. And I will pray with you, that you have *wise* wishes."

The boy's jaw had fallen open long ago. He could barely think, let alone speak. He had no idea where he was, or who he was, or who this man was before him. He knew he wanted to ask a question. His lips and throat struggled to form the words.

"Are . . . are you a . . . a . . . magician?"

"Yes, my son," laughed Theron. "That is exactly what I am. May I tell you a story?"

"Yes," said the amazed boy softly.

"Come with me, then," said Theron, extending his hand. The boy touched it and the walls of the stone cell disappeared. They now were standing in a vast green meadow. Sun shone down on both of them. There was no snow. The magician sat himself cross-legged on the grass. His young charge followed.

"Eight hundred years ago, men who were called Wizards carried on the magic secrets of Egypt and China. Their powers were used to combat the forces of evil. It was a good time for the world."

The magician touched his amulet. Before their very eyes, a tree began to grow. First, it was a sapling, then it was a slender pole against the sky. Next it thickened and grew heavy with branches. All of this happened in

less than a minute. The boy sat in frank amazement. The magician smiled.

"A good time for all mankind, when Wizards walked the earth. But this good time was short-lived. The hordes of Genghis Khan descended upon civilization. The Wizards and their lore were all but destroyed."

Theron raised his arm in a mighty gesture. The great tree under which they sat burst into flames. The boy moved close to his teacher. Together, they watched the tree become reduced to a pile of ashes.

"Only a very few Wizards managed to escape," Theron continued. "They wandered the world, clutching their magic books and secret manuscripts."

The boy noticed that the air was growing chilly.

"In isolation, in whispers, this handful of true magicians kept mystical knowledge alive in their lonely travels."

When the boy exhaled, he saw his breath hang in the air. He felt the cold touch of snow on his face. He looked down to see that the earth was covered with frost. Mountains now rose in the distance—snowcapped and forbidding.

"And finally, these magicians settled here. In Tibet. In this valley. Here their secrets have been preserved."

Theron clapped his hands three times. Suddenly, they were no longer out in the snow. They were standing in the stone lamasery cell. Theron sat on the floor of the room and crossed his legs. He beckoned to the child to sit beside him.

"Here, in this place, magic lives. This is the College of Magic, my son."

The boy repeated the words in wonder. "The College of Magic."

"But most of us here are Brothers in an Order of the Mysteries. Our magic may never leave the confines of

these halls. The world will never know of the miracles we can perform."

Theron waved his hand and a dove appeared. A fragile white creature, it flew around the room, flapping its wings noisily. It flew from wall to wall, looking for a way out of the windowless cell.

"Our secrets are locked in this place. Trapped here like this bird."

The boy watched the bird struggle to find an exit. It hurled itself against the wall and fell to the floor. The boy ran to the bird, took it gently into his hands, and then set it tenderly on the stone floor.

"Can't we set it free?" he asked.

"*You* can," said Theron. "Put this around your neck. Without it, even *I* can do little." The magician removed the amulet from around his own neck and gave it to the boy. "Touch it with one hand."

The boy did as he was told.

"Now, close your eyes and picture a window, a large open window. Do you see it?"

"Yes."

"And what is beyond?"

"A forest. Trees. The sky."

"Concentrate on what you see and keep touching the amulet. Do you see the window?"

"Yes."

"Now, repeat these words. *By the eternal powers of Theron the Master.*"

"*By the eternal powers of Theron the Master!*"

"Open your eyes, boy."

In the stone wall before them was the very window the boy had pictured. Outside, there were no bleak Tibetan mountains. Instead, there was a deep green forest. And beyond it—the sky.

The boy lifted the dove from the ground, carried it to the window, and tossed it into the air. With a rustle of wings, the creature became weightless. Up it went, dis-

appearing finally into the sky.

The boy turned to Theron with a grin of satisfaction. He didn't speak. He didn't have to.

"You have done well, my son. It is a sign. You have been chosen to carry the Secrets of the College of Magic into the world of men. The amulet and its powers will be passed down to you. In the years to come, I will teach you all I know. You will study and meditate and grow to understand the deeper meaning of your life. Then you will be worthy to go out into the world and use the True Magic of the universe to do good among men."

The boy, though only eight years old, was already wise enough to be awed by Theron's words. He lowered his eyes to the ground. The magician touched his head.

"I leave you now. You must rest and prepare yourself for the long studies ahead. So must I." The old man turned to leave the cell.

"Sir . . . ," called the boy.

The old man turned back. "Yes?"

"I don't know where I came from or how I came to this place. I don't know who you are or why you've chosen me. I'm happy, though. I know that. And I'm ready to learn."

"Good." The old man turned again to leave.

"But sir—" the boy interrupted him.

"Yes?"

"I do have one question, please."

"And what is that?"

"What is my name?"

Theron smiled. He looked at the dark-haired boy before him and wanted to embrace him. Instead, he did so with his eyes.

"Your name? Why, from this moment you are Mandrake—*the Magician!*"

II

THIS WEEK!
THE INCREDIBLE MANDRAKE!
TONIGHT ONLY:
FOR THE BENEFIT
OF ST. THOMAS'S
HOSPITAL FOR CHILDREN

A small spotlight hit the gold letters on the placard in the lobby of the Lake Tahoe lodge. Dr. Malcolm Lindsay looked at the sign with some relief. But not enough. Not nearly enough. He touched his own wrist; the pulse was still racing. The throbbing in his temples had not gone away. And if he could have seen himself, Dr. Lindsay would have known that his shock of professorial gray hair was still askew, that his eyes were bloodshot—wild with anxiety.

"Mandrake," he muttered involuntarily under his breath. "Thank God."

He dug deep into the pocket of his wrinkled gray suit. Lint, keys, scraps of paper with hastily scribbled telephone numbers. And finally a wad of bills, none larger

than a ten. Counting the money quickly as he walked, Lindsay moved to a table that had been set up near the door to the hotel's night club room.

The two ladies at the table were obviously volunteers. Each wore a St. Thomas's Hospital button and one wore a large violet orchid. The one with the flower was talking to a tall, well-built black man in dark blue slacks and an open-necked print shirt.

"It's so dear of Mandrake to be doing this for the hospital, Mr. Lothar. There isn't *anyone* who could do us this much good. We've hardly got a ticket left!"

Lothar smiled. "Everybody loves magic." His voice had just the faintest tinge of an accent. Jamaican? Oxford English? It was hard to tell. But coupled with his shaved head, it lent him an air that was unmistakably exotic, certainly well-suited to Mandrake's magical retinue.

Dr. Lindsay noticed Lothar as he approached and wondered if he should speak to him, if he should ask to see Mandrake *before* the performance. But even as he pondered it, the question became irrelevant. A messenger from backstage came hurriedly to where Lothar stood.

"Ten minutes," the messenger reported.

"If you ladies will excuse me . . ." With a slight bow, Lothar disappeared into the glittering, milling crowd.

Dr. Lindsay fumbled around in his pockets, removed the wad of bills and extended it.

"One please. Just for the show. I won't be eating dinner."

"Well, it's too late for dinner. It's just drinks and the show now. Same admission, though." As the volunteer lady spoke, it was obvious that Dr. Lindsay's unkempt, distracted appearance had taken her aback somewhat.

"It doesn't matter. Please. Take my money. Take it out of this." He thrust the entire wad of bills at her. "Just hurry, please. I've got to get a good seat."

The lady raised her eyebrows and looked at her co-worker.

"Please," Dr. Lindsay repeated. Little beads of perspiration now lined his forehead. He mopped his brow quickly with his handkerchief. "I'm a great fan of Mandrake the Magician."

Lindsay realized what was happening. He had allowed his hysteria to show and the women were frightened. They must have thought him drunk. Or mad. Maybe they thought he was a crazed assassin, out to take pot shots at famous entertainers. *Better pull yourself together, Lindsay,* the doctor thought. He breathed deeply and tried to do just that.

"In fact," he continued in a calmer voice, "you might say I'm Mandrake's *greatest* fan. You know that Mrs. Miller who goes to *every* Johnny Carson show? Well, I'm sort of the Mrs. Miller of Mandrake the Magician. I've seen every show he's given for the last five years. All except his European tours, of course. I was in the studio audience when he did the "Merv Griffin Show." And I saw his benefit at the Palace Theatre in New York—the one for the policeman's fund. I've seen Mandrake perform *hundreds* of times." He paused. "And I still can't figure out how he does it!"

It worked. The ice broke. The lady with the orchid smiled, pulled two twenty-dollar bills off of the roll, put them in her drawer, returned the rest of the money, and handed the strange gray-haired gentleman a ticket. "Enjoy the show," she said.

He could tell that she still thought he was crazy, but had decided that he was harmless. And Dr. Lindsay himself was not really sure he was not crazy. After the events of the past months, and especially the past two days, it would be a miracle to have remained sane. He entered the showroom.

The crowd inside chattered excitedly after its forty-dollar-a-plate, strictly-for-charity dinner. Waiters circulated with after-dinner drinks.

A blue velvet curtain hid the stage itself from view. The rich blue fabric was embellished with fine, hand-sewn gold embroidery which emblazoned one dramatic word across the curtains length. One word in large gold script. One word:

MANDRAKE!

Dr. Lindsay tipped the maitre d' and successfully bought himself a ringside seat. When the waiter came to take the drink order, Dr. Lindsay demurred. "Perrier water, please." He dared not dull what was left of his senses or alter what was left of his perceptions. He was a man in danger. He knew it. But soon, with any luck at all, he would have an ally. And together, Lindsay prayed, they would find a way out. The doctor tried to still his racing mind. He fixed his gaze on the rich blue curtain and waited for the show to begin.

In the lobby, two men approached the ticket table. As they did, the volunteer ladies exchanged a glance. This was a peculiar-looking pair.

The older of the two, about forty-five, had very bad skin. It was a ghastly shade of skim milk white and prone to noticeable blemishes and splotches of unhealthy-looking red. This was made more apparent by the color of his hair, which was a shocking shade of bright carrot red. A thick, unkempt beard could not conceal the patches of scabby red skin on the lower part of the face.

And with this most unpleasant-looking gentleman stood a younger man, a man in his mid- to late twenties. He was far more attractive than his friend. But he appeared to be stoned on something, or possibly retarded. His mouth hung slightly open and his eyes seemed fixed on an imaginary object on the floor, maybe five feet ahead of him. He stood behind his friend, as if he were being led on some invisible leash that the red-headed gentleman held.

"Two," said the man with red hair. No *please*, just *two*. The volunteer lady didn't like his manner any better

than she liked his looks. He thrust two fifty-dollar bills into her hand.

"Did it start yet?" he demanded.

"Well, that depends on what you mean," said the lady with the orchid, in her most dignified tone, intending to explain that if *it* referred to dinner, that had not only started but was over. And if *it* referred to the show, that was going to begin in a minute or two.

But before she could make this explanation, the red-headed man was barking at her.

"What do you think I mean? Did the magician start his act yet or not?" Angry, the red blotches on his cheeks seemed even brighter.

"Not," replied the lady with the orchid, in as high-handed a tone as she could muster.

With a grunt, the man with the red beard collected his change and started for the showroom entrance. His slack-jawed friend followed a few paces behind. The volunteer lady now noticed that the zombie-like friend didn't appear to be dressed for the occasion at all. He wore khaki work pants and a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves. To make matters worse, the rolled sleeves revealed a tattoo on his muscular left arm. "U.S.N." it read.

The volunteer lady turned to her co-worker.

"Did you see that? This Mandrake's got the strangest following, doesn't he?"

"Takes all kinds," the other woman announced. "And I guess they *all* love magic."

The lights in the showroom began to dim slowly. From somewhere unseen, a harp played strange scales, joined a few moments later by sounds from an unidentifiable but vaguely middle-eastern sounding instrument. The music filled one's head and seemed to lift the entire room into another plane of awareness, a plane where there were no more waiters. No more champagne glasses. No more roast beef gravy stains on tablecloths

or bits of unfinished chocolate eclair on china plates. No more coffee cups. No cigarettes or conversation. Only strange, heavenly music and a blue velvet curtain with gold embroidery. The show was beginning!

A soft pink spotlight hit the curtain, which parted slightly to reveal a beautiful young woman with light brown hair in her early twenties. She wore a glittering, sequined leotard that did wonders for her trim, athletic figure and her Nordic blue eyes.

"Welcome," she said. "I am Narda."

The audience sat transfixed though not a single trick had been performed, magic had begun.

"It is my duty and pleasure to introduce to you the world's most renowned master of the mystical arts. The incomparable . . ." She paused with the perfect timing of a consummate entertainer, ". . . Mandrake!"

It happened in an instant. A fraction of a second. The blue velvet curtain burst into flames, a wall of gold fire flaring up before the astonished, terrified eyes of the audience.

Someone started to scream, but before a panicked rush for the door could begin, the fire changed colors.

Now the flames were green. The audience relaxed and sighed audibly with relief and wonder. This was the evening's first illusion, they now realized, and a spectacular one. The flames turned soft pink, a wall of fire that threw off no heat whatever. In fact, the room was cool and pleasant. The sweet smell of incense pervaded the air. A faint clinking of chimes, tiny bells struck by the passing wind, made an Oriental sound as the fire continued, now turning blue. Still no heat. No smoke. Just the sound of wind chimes, the scent of exotic perfume, and the sight of a wall of flame—which suddenly was transformed again.

The audience could scarcely believe their eyes. All at once, in the center of the flames, stood the figure of a man. Untouched, unharmed, he stood six feet two in-

ches tall, an imposing figure with arms outstretched in an ancient gesture. He wore a simple black tuxedo, the drape of which could not conceal the powerful athleticism of his torso, the majestic line of his shoulders, or the proud set of his head. A black cape with red silk lining blew out behind him in the scented wind. Around his neck, a small gold disk hung on a fine gold chain.

In another costume, he could have been a football player. Or a movie star. His eyes gave him all the charisma he would have needed to become a box-office sensation. They were a cold, pale gray—clear as glass—set off by a head of curly, dark brown hair.

The magician thrust his extended arms up over his head, tossed his chin back, and snapped the fingers of both hands in an eloquent and very theatrical gesture.

The flames disappeared. Now he was standing before the embroidered curtain. The one that spelled his name in gold. *Mandrake.* He bowed. The crowd went wild.

"Thank you." The magician stood up.

"Thank you." He was laughing with the audience, which would not stop applauding.

"Thank you." He raised his arms and a hush fell over the room. The wind chimes began their sweet, strange sounds again as Mandrake began to speak. His voice lulled the already rapt crowd into total belief—total involvement with everything they watched.

"Magic. Everybody loves it . . . lucky for me."

Mandrake waved his right hand and a silver ball appeared, perfectly balanced and spinning on the magician's index finger.

"But if it ever goes out of style, as you can see, I could always juggle."

He extended the other hand and a second ball appeared, but gold. Now he had a ball spinning on each of his index fingers.

"Or play basketball."

The shining balls disappeared and were replaced in an instant by two regulation ABA basketballs, one in the

palm of each hand. Then the magician raised his palms and sent them flying out over the audience.

"But you see, I don't believe that magic ever *will* go out of style, and for a very good reason."

Mandrake began to pull things out of his sleeve, out of thin air, out of a hat that Narda extended before him, and then he proceeded to make each object disappear with a glance or a snap of his fingers. The audience sat spellbound.

"You see, I believe that deep inside each of us is a secret and important desire to believe that there is *more* to this life of ours than that which we can see and hear and touch.

A bouquet of crysanthemums—yellow ones—appeared from the buttons of his shirt.

"And this desire for something more is based upon truth. For there *is* something more to our universe than the average man can see or sense."

He snapped his fingers. The flowers disappeared.

"And that something more is what we call. . ."

He raised his arms. Twelve doves came flapping out of nowhere. They flew out into the audience and disappeared over a rainbow that now extended from one end of the room to another.

". . .Magic!" The rainbow disappeared.

Narda extended a large clay flower pot in front of the magician.

"What I try to do. . ."

She tipped the pot. It was plainly empty.

"What I try to accomplish. . ."

Within seconds, a palm tree grew from seedling to mature, living plant.

". . .is the expansion of your consciousness. To enable you to see that there *is* indeed something far beyond your poor mortal powers of perception."

The pot—and Narda—vanished into thin air. The crowd applauded wildly.

They were still cheering when Mandrake noticed a

very attractive young woman near the front of the auditorium. She held a Polaroid camera, poised to take a picture of Mandrake onstage.

"I'm sorry, miss." The magician spoke directly to her. "They don't allow photographs in the showroom."

The disappointed fan started to close her instant camera.

Mandrake grinned. "But maybe there's a way to get around that little regulation." He stepped down from the stage and moved beside her. The ace spotlight operator, used to Mandrake's maneuvers in the audience, had no trouble following "the act" as it moved out of the traditional confines. Mandrake gently took the Polaroid from the young woman and closed it.

"You know, most of us take the taking of a picture for granted. We just assume the normal process is going on—the shutter snaps, the lens allows light to get onto the film. All the usual stuff. But I'm going to show you how I can take photographs with a very different process. One Mr. Eastman and Mr. Kodak never dreamed of. My method works when the camera is closed! No button pressing, nothing mechanical. I will use light energy to project an image onto the film by creating this image in the chamber of my mind. The thought image is the one that will appear on film!"

"I'd still like to get a shot of *you,* Mandrake," the young woman in the audience said. Her friend giggled, but the young woman just gazed straight into the handsome magician's eyes.

"That's tempting," Mandrake replied, holding her gaze. "How about a picture of the two of us? But in a more romantic setting than this one." He paused. "Where would you like to be?"

"With you? I can't say in public!" The friend was laughing uncontrollably now. The sheer proximity of the movie-star handsome magician had turned her into a schoolgirl.

"Oh come on," Mandrake continued. He started to stare at the camera. "How about Paris? How about the two of us in Paris together? Strolling down the Champs Elysées?"

"Yeah, how about it?" the young woman sighed.

Mandrake fixed his cold gray stare on the camera. One could almost feel the energy flowing between his piercing eyes and the small plastic box.

"What about the Eiffel Tower?" the young woman continued.

Mandrake broke his gaze at the camera and raised his arms high over his head.

"*By the eternal powers of Theron the Master*!"

He returned his arms to their normal position. "Be my guest." He returned the camera to the mystified lady, whose friend had stopped giggling and now strained forward to see what was going on. "Pull," said Mandrake. "Don't be afraid."

The young woman gave a yank on the instant film. She could not, would not, believe her eyes.

"Oh my God," she sighed, and held the picture up for the audience and her straining friend to see. "It's me . . . and Mandrake . . . in front of the Eiffel Tower!"

And that is exactly what it was. Those sitting close enough to the front gasped audibly as they saw the photo. It was no fake. In her hand was a picture of Mandrake the Magician and this attractive young audience-member, standing arm in arm before the camera, posed like a pair of happy tourists before France's greatest landmark.

Not eight feet away, at his ringside table, Dr. Malcolm Lindsay was in something like awe. His attention, as that of most of the audience, was riveted to the magician. No one had ever performed such feats. Not on film, not on television. Live, in person, here was a man who could do what no magician, no mystic, had ever

been able to do before. He could throw up solid images and reclaim them as easily as other men walked or breathed or sang. He could defy the laws of physics, of probability, of nature herself. Lindsay the scientist, Lindsay the experimenter, Lindsay, the man in sore need of a friend with extra powers, sat transfixed by the magic act before him.

Yet better had Dr. Malcolm Lindsay not been so enraptured by Mandrake's performance. Better had he maintained just a fraction of the perspective for which he had been praised before the strange events of the past year. For then Lindsay might have seen a man with a tattoo take a seat just behind him. He might have seen this man quietly open a briefcase and remove a small disposable hypodermic needle.

"Keep the picture, darling," Mandrake told the young woman from the audience. "A souvenir."

"I wish it would come true," she whispered.

"You never know," the magician replied as he made his way back to the stage platform.

The crowd applauded. Mandrake snapped a finger and a roaring Bengal tiger appeared out of nowhere. It faced the crowd and opened wide its terrifying jaws in a sound that struck a note of primal terror.

And then it happened.

A scream from a woman in the front row.

Dr. Malcolm Lindsay was standing up at his seat. He staggered forward three steps, his right arm extended toward the stage, his left one clutching his chest. His eyes were wide with some unearthly pain, bulging, red-rimmed, about to pop out of their sockets. The veins on his neck and hands stood out like branches against a bright sky. His mouth gaped open, fishlike, straining to make a sound. At first, only a gurgling, strangling noise emerged, but then one word—a cry as loud and strong as the roar of the magician's tiger.

"Mandrake!" The doctor's arm stretched a little further toward the stage, just enough to destroy what was left of the traumatized gentleman's balance. He toppled forward, collapsed, breathing hard but unevenly in gasps. He writhed twice on the floor. And then he was still.

Mandrake moved to the stricken man's side.

"Is there a doctor here?" he asked the crowd and touched the fallen gentleman's shoulder.

Lindsay was trying hard to speak. His lips strained and his throat worked as hard as it could to force the word, the one word he had to form.

"Relax," Mandrake told him.

"Arka . . ." The sound started to come. Dr. Lindsay could just barely force a whisper through his contracted throat. "Arkad . . . Arkadian." He paused, swallowed hard and then whispered it again. "Arkadian." And he was silent.

At the back of the room the tattooed man was making a hasty exit past the lady with the orchid.

"What's going on? What's . . ."

But the man was gone. He had disappeared, door swinging behind him, into the parking lot.

Lothar, who had been watching the show from the wings where he customarily cued the stage manager, came out through the showroom doors.

"Did you see a man with a tattoo? He was wearing khaki pants. I was watching the show from inside when a man collapsed and I saw this guy with khaki pants making a pretty fast ex . . ."

"He's out there!" The orchid lady's voice turned shrill. "In the parking lot!"

Lothar ran through the parking lot doors, just in time to see the man with the tattoo climbing into a 1977 Ford. Black. With California plates. But before Lothar could make a mental note of the license number, he re-

alized what was happening. The car, which had kicked over in an instant, was burning rubber from the lot with a terrible screech, was turning around on a dime, and was heading straight for Lothar at about forty miles an hour!

Lothar could feel an incredible wind rush past as he jumped from the path of the speeding machine. And not a moment too soon. He was lucky to escape with nothing wounded but his pride as he pushed up from the asphalt where he had fallen and took note of the ripped knee in his dark blue trousers.

Returning to the hotel, Lothar found the show in ruins. Mandrake knelt beside the fallen audience member. A red-haired man with a pallid, blotchy complexion had come forward and identified himself as a doctor. He had quickly diagnosed Lindsay's seizure as a heart attack and had immediately ordered someone to call an ambulance. Now he monitered Lindsay's pulse. Mandrake could not take his eyes off of the stricken man's face. He knew it from somewhere. From somewhere. But where?

The doctor dropped Lindsay's wrist.

"He's dead."

Mandrake kept staring at the body. Its troubled face. Its impassioned expression. And what had those last words meant?

"Was there any identification?" the bearded doctor asked.

"None," Mandrake replied. "None at all."

III

The magician rubbed his face with Albolene cream to remove that last vestige of make-up. The events of not half an hour before had troubled him deeply.

Across the dressing room, Lothar sat in silence. He knew his friend had been shaken by what had just happened. There was a knock at the door. Narda's voice came from outside.

"Everybody decent?"

"Come on in," Lothar called.

Narda entered the dressing room. Out of her exotic "magic act" costume, she was a perfectly ordinary raving beauty. She wore her hair simply, tucked up in the back, and was dressed in jeans and a throw-on shirt. She moved to Mandrake and touched him on the shoulder with sisterly affection.

"How ya holdin' up chief?" she asked.

"I'm fine," the magician replied. But it was obvious that his mind was a thousand miles away, playing and replaying the strange scene in the showroom, searching for a meaning to the word the man had uttered before the doctor pronounced him dead. Who or what was *Arkadian*? And why had the old man looked so damnably familiar?

"He knew me," Mandrake said aloud, but mostly to himself. "That man knew me and he was trying to tell me something. I'm sure of it."

"Maybe not," said Lothar, trying to lighten the tone of things. "You're only as famous as Burt Reynolds.

Maybe he was there like the rest of the audience, to get the jump on *People* magazine and see that gorgeous puss in person. What was it Rona Barrett called you? 'That marvelous macho magician. The Prince Charming of prestidigitation'?"

Mandrake was too deep in thought to appreciate the good-natured ribbing. He had finished with the cream and had begun to dress. "No," he mused as he pulled on a brown knit shirt. "We'd met. I'm sure of that. But there's something about the face that's changed."

Lothar stretched out in his chair. "Well, the whole thing doesn't compute, if you ask me. The doctor announces that the old man's had a heart attack . . . but that guy with the tattoo was in one big hurry to leave the showroom. *Plus* he tries to flatten me with his car. I'd bet anything that was no heart attack. I'd bet anything you've got.

"Well, we ought to look into it, anyway." Mandrake ran a comb through his thick, dark hair. "Narda, contact the morgue. I want to have a look at the body."

"Sure, chief." She had begun cleaning up the cleansing cream and Kleenex that littered the dressing table.

The phone rang. Narda reached to answer it.

"Hello?" A moment of silence. Narda's eyebrows raised and she uttered a small, exhaled sound of surprise. "Thank you, I'll tell him." She hung up.

"What's wrong?" Lothar asked. "Who was that?"

"The hotel switchboard." She turned to Mandrake. "Say, Mr. Magician, didn't you tell us the Agency was giving us a few months off to do this tour?"

"Of course," Mandrake replied.

"Well, somebody should have told the Agency. We've got a visitor, it seems. Alec. He's waiting in the showroom."

Lothar and Mandrake exchanged a look of shared surprise. The last place either of them had expected to

find Alec Gordon was in Lake Tahoe. When the Agency had agreed to give its star trio—Mandrake, Lothar, and Narda—a chance to go out on the road, Gordon had seemed relieved. Not that he didn't appreciate Mandrake's prowess. The magician was, in many ways, the most valuable man the Agency had. But something about the magic man's powers also rubbed Alec Gordon the wrong way. Especially the fact that Mandrake *never* revealed the secrets *behind* the feats of magic he performed. Tricks, Alec Gordon would call them. Anything he couldn't understand *had* to be a trick, a gimmick, a ruse.

Alec Gordon. Sub-Director of one of the most powerful, diversified, and little understood segments of the federal bureaucracy, a segment affectionately known from within as "The Agency." Mandrake, Narda, and Lothar were indispensible to him in solving cases and obtaining information that was just too tricky by normal means. Their show-biz notoreity provided a perfect cover for Agency activities. In fact, every few years a lengthy tour was arranged to *keep* Mandrake and Company in the limelight.

It was just such a tour they were engaged in at present. After the Tahoe stint, which had three more days to go, there were scheduled appearances by Mandrake the Magician in Dallas, Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, a big "concert of magic" at Madison Square Garden, and a mammoth, three-week engagement in Toronto. All of this prior to a European tour. It had been understood that during this time, the Agency would make *no* demands on the trio. Regular field agents would just have to handle everything. But now—for some unknown reason—Alec Gordon, the man who gave out the assignments, had turned up in Tahoe. Neither Mandrake nor Lothar were pleased with the prospects as they headed toward the showroom to meet him. It was agreed that

Narda would stay behind in the dressing room with the telephone trying to locate the body of the heart attack victim, so Mandrake could go have the second look he needed to set his mind at ease.

As the magician and his friend entered the showroom, they were thrown yet another curve. Three men were perched on ladders, rolling the blue velvet show curtain. The magic act's few props—a table, a chair, a potted palm—had already been packed in wooden shipping crates. On one of these sat Alec Gordon.

"Okay, Alec," Mandrake begun. "What's going on? And don't tell me you came over to Tahoe for the skiing."

"Actually, I came for the casinos," Alec grinned. He was an attractive man in his late forties. Something in his manner suggested a British background. He was, however, strictly Boston bred. This fact had not stopped the underlings at the Agency from nicknaming him "Sub-Director Bond," after the Ian Fleming hero whom he was said to resemble.

"Please, Alec, no games tonight. We've had a rough one." Lothar eased himself into one of the audience chairs.

"So I heard. Nothing like a death in the audience to spice up the act; isn't that what they always say?"

"Not if they've got any taste," Mandrake countered. The two of them could go on this way for hours. Friendly enemies. Powerful Agency brass and renegade Agent. Still, Mandrake was in no mood for repartee. Frankly, he had been looking forward to this tour. He loved performing. Something about reaching out with his art to a large number of people appealed to Mandrake. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he felt he had created more than one true believer where there had only been a bored spectator before. And now it was obvious that Alec was about to spring something. Something that would interrupt the long-awaited Dallas to Toronto

junket. "They're taking down the curtain," Mandrake said, fixing his gaze on Alec and not letting go. "What does that mean?"

"You know as well as I do. The tour's over. The rest of your bookings have been cancelled."

"But we just started," Lothar reminded the Sub-Director.

"I know and I'm sorry. But the Director himself thinks you are the only folks for the job. It's a very delicate situation and it looks as if it may need the magic touch."

"Your regular field agents can't handle it?" Mandrake asked, watching the workmen rolling the curtain, knowing the answer before it came.

"I said I was sorry. But this one is big-time, Mandrake. It involves the Agency itself. And a threat to national security." Alec gestured to the workmen. Within moments they had left their work unfinished, descended their ladders, and vacated the room. "Some files have been stolen," Alec continued. "There's a large international business conglomerate the Agency has had numerous contracts and dealings with. Some very delicate stuff. Now it turns out a file detailing these dealings has been stolen from the company's headquarters. If the contents of that file surfaces anywhere—I mean in the press, in the hands of a subversive group, in the hands of *another nation*—there'll be hell to pay."

"The Agency has been working with this private corporation on projects?" Lothar was getting interested.

"On big ones," Alec replied. "They've got the resources. They're a monster conglomerate with their tentacles in everything. And I mean *everything*. You name it. Amusement parks, beauty pageants, electronics, nuclear reactors. That's why they've been useful to us. *So* useful, in fact, that the file is a walking time-bomb until it's back in the office of the Chairman of the Board."

"That's where it was stolen from?"

"That's right."

Mandrake was beginning to see that Alec was serious. He abandoned all hope of salvaging his tour. "Okay, let's get a little more specific. First of all, the name of the company."

"Arkadian Enterprises." Alec said it in a simple, matter-of-fact tone. He obviously had no idea what a powder keg he was igniting. Lothar and Mandrake exchanged a quick, serious glance.

"Did you say *Arkadian*?" Lothar got up from the table and started to pace.

"That's right," Alec replied. "The file was stolen from the office of the Chairman of the Board . . . Raymond Arkadian."

There was a moment of silence before Mandrake spoke. "Alec—you might not believe this, but that guy who had a heart attack here earlier, during the show . . ."

"Yeah?" Alec muttered impatiently.

"This guy who *supposedly*, anyway, had a heart attack, the last words he spoke before he lost consciousness, the last thing he said was Arkadian. *Arkadian*."

"You're kidding."

Mandrake turned to his confidant. "Lothar, have you got that roll of film I asked you to buy this afternoon?"

Lothar produced a roll of Polaroid film from his jacket pocket.

"Arkadian," Mandrake mumbled under his breath as he took the instant film out of its box and held it in the palm of his hand. "Arkadian." The magician touched the gold amulet suspended around his neck. He stared at the film with the same intensity he had used during his magic show, when he had been projecting an image of Paris. Now his eyes glazed over once again as they stared. The intensity of the gaze seemed to have its very own energy, as if it could have started a fire, like light reflected off a mirror. Mandrake stared hard at the film cartridge.

"By the eternal powers of Theron the Master."

Mandrake touched his forehead with his other hand. The blank stare left his eyes and he gave the instant film a tug. Out came a photograph. There was the showroom at the very moment Mandrake had first noticed the gray-haired man. The first few rows of audience were visible. There was the girl who had wanted Mandrake's picture. And there was her giggling friend. There too was the man with the tattoo, leaning forward.

"That's the guy who tried to steamroll me," Lothar said as he leaned in to get a better look at the picture.

"And *that's* Dr. Malcolm Lindsay," Mandrake remarked calmly, pointing to the photograph of the gray-haired gentleman who moments later would fall to the floor with the word "Arkadian." "His face is different. Older. Under pressure. And he used to have a beard. But that's him. *That's* why I thought I recognized that face! We met one time. He and his daughter were doing research at Stanford University. Extrasensory perception and parapsychology. His daughter had an idea my magic was more than stage illusion and wanted to examine me . . ."

Lothar and Alec Gordon couldn't help exchanging a meaningful grin, acknowledging the double-meaning in Mandrake's remark.

"Knock it off," Mandrake commanded them. "You know what I'm talking about. She wanted to arrange controlled lab testing . . ."

"Of your powers," Alec finished the sentence. "Can I see that picture?"

Mandrake handed the Polaroid photo to his Agency superior. Alec looked at it carefully. "You know, Mr. Magic, it kills me when you pull these things. How the hell did you . . ."

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you, Alec."

"Yeah, right," the Sub-Director mockingly agreed. "You harness the *real* magic of the universe. I've heard all that before."

"But you still don't believe it." The magician smiled.

"Nope." But Alec did. "But I *do* believe one thing. This has *got* to be Dr. Malcolm Lindsay's twin brother . . . except he doesn't have one."

"What are you talking about?" Lothar demanded.

"I'm talking about I know Malcolm Lindsay's face, too. See, that Stanford Project you just mentioned was being funded by . . ."

Lothar and Mandrake said it together in wonder: "Raymond Arkadian."

"Exactly. The Arkadian Foundation. So when the file was discovered to be missing, Lindsay's was one of the dossiers we looked at."

"And," Lothar prodded.

"And Lindsay couldn't have had anything to do with it."

"Why not?" asked Mandrake.

"He's been dead for over a year. Died in a car crash."

The three were still standing in confused silence when Narda entered the showroom.

"Hi, Alec. Welcome to Tahoe."

"Narda," he replied, with a playful but abbreviated bow.

"Mandrake," Narda continued. "I've got some pretty weird news."

"Welcome to the club." Lothar took the picture from Alec and checked it again.

"I've called everyone possible. There's no record of a body having been picked up from this hotel tonight *at all*. In fact, no bodies have been taken to the Tahoe morgue since this afternoon. And no ambulances have gone out since an hour before the guy collapsed in our audience."

Narda looked hard at Mandrake. She could tell that her puzzling news had charged him, set him off. It was at this moment, Narda knew, that Mandrake the Mag-

ician "took the case." Now he wouldn't be able to rest until the questions were answered, the mystery solved.

"Okay," Mandrake spoke up. "Alec, what do you say we all go grab a bite to eat and you can explain in detail what you know about Arkadian Enterprises and its Chairman. Then you can finish filling us in on the missing file. There's *something* going on here, but I'll be damned if I know what it is. We'll start with facts."

"The few I know," Alec replied. "And dinner sounds great. It's on the Agency."

"You *bet* it is," Lothar felt obliged to add.

"Mandrake, there's just one other message, before I forget," Narda spoke up as the four of them headed out of the hotel. The switchboard said they'd taken three messages for you during the show, all from the same girl. The last one was marked 'Urgent.' The girl's name —the name she left—is Jennifer Lindsay. She said you'd remember her as a Doctor Malcolm Lindsay's daughter."

That was about the limit. The bounds of credibility were being tested moment by moment. "Is there anything else?" Mandrake asked Narda.

"Nope," his assistant replied. "Just that her flight arrives at eight-o-nine tomorrow morning."

The four of them then agreed on two things. First, they reached a quick consensus that this chain of events was in no way coincidental, although no one had much inkling how anything fit into anything else. A man who is already presumed to be dead dies again, muttering the name of a firm from which top-secret documents have recently been stolen. And now this same dead —living? —man's daughter was on her way uninvited to see Mandrake. Yes, that first point of agreement was easy. These events were not a mammoth coincidence. The second decision was even simpler: they unanimously voted to skip late dinner in favor of an early breakfast before meeting Jennifer Lindsay at the Lake Tahoe airport.

* * *

At breakfast the next morning, Alec held forth on the missing file and the person known as Raymond Arkadian.

"Some people say he's trying to out-Hughes Howard Hughes as far has holdings go. Arkadian's public image is so thick with glamour and hype, no one is aware of all the companies his conglomerate *really* controls. For every crazy promotion that hits the press—a beauty pageant or an amusement park to end *all* amusement parks—there's the same number of intelligence operations happening quietly. A half dozen NASA satellites floating in space on intelligence missions right now were designed, built, and launched by Arkadian-owned companies. All in the utmost secrecy. It works out great for everybody." He took a hefty swallow of coffee.

Lothar, finishing a cinammon roll, asked the most important question of the morning. "Exactly what was in the missing file?"

"Name it," Alec replied gravely. "Just name it. Every single detail on Arkadian's Agency connections. Including Operation Domino."

"Salvage of the sunken Russian submarine?" This was less a question from Mandrake than a statement of awesome fact.

"You got it. If that sub can be raised, it'll be an intelligence coup, but if the lid blows off too early . . . Whammo. End of project. And that's just the beginning of what's in the file. Wanna try a possible cancer cure on for size?"

Narda almost dropped her grapefruit spoon.

"I'm serious. Arkadian thinks he might be close, too. It's a pet project that he's been funding through a foundation of his for years. The drug kills cancer cells and not only arrests malignancies, but wipes them out!"

"Won't do badly on the black market," Mandrake conjectured.

"Just part of what could happen. See, the cancer formula is an uncontrolled substance. It can kill whole organisms—*people* instead of cancer—if not used properly."

"I've got a headache," Narda told the group. "This file business and the case of the disappearing heart attack victim. Who *was* that in the showroom? Dr. Malcolm Lindsay? His double? His ghost? And there's no corpse, so nothing can be identified. We don't know *who* died or if his death was due to natural causes. . ."

Mandrake rose. "Well, let's hope that Jennifer can shed a bit of light on that subject, shall we? It's seven-forty. We'd better head for the airport. Here's the check, Alec. It was *your* pleasure."

"Oops!" Jennifer Lindsay had dropped her pocketbook and bumped heads with Mandrake as they both tried to pick it up at once. The twenty-two-year-old Ms. Lindsay, it turned out, was something of a klutz. A beautiful klutz, Mandrake would have been the first to add. But a klutz. It had taken them close to half an hour to search for and never find an overnight bag Ms. Lindsay thought the airline had mislaid. All of this effort, only to have her realize, finally, that she had never brought the case in the first place.

Jennifer Lindsay. A little dizzy, but undeniably magnificent. Brilliant in her chosen field—parapsychology, in which she functioned as her father's research assistant—and beautiful as well, with clear green eyes, auburn hair, and a complexion that could only have been half-Irish (her mother's side). She had a peaches-and-cream look that was rare, especially in California, where she and her father spent most of their time doing research.

Now Jennifer kept the apartment in San Francisco by herself. She had not been able to move out, after the accident.

"Can you explain it to me?" Mandrake asked as they got into his car. Lothar and Narda were in the back seat, waiting. Alec was going to drive.

"Can I explain what?" Jennifer asked, bumping her head, not without a slight thud, as she got into the car.

"How your father can have told you to come find me here *and* have been dead for a year."

"No, I can't explain that." She started rummaging through the debris in her purse.

"Well, why don't you go back through the events of the past twenty-four hours for me, just once more."

"Okay. I got a phone call from my father. Now, this surprised me, because like everyone else, I thought he was dead. I mean, when he was killed in the car crash last year, things became very difficult for me. We had been very close, Dad and I. Readjusting took forever. I'm not sure even now that I've really adjusted to not having him around."

"How did the police identify the body from the car crash as your father?" Alec asked as he turned the car onto the freeway. "The dossier stated that the body was pretty badly. . ."

"Burned beyond recognition," Jennifer finished the sentence quietly. "They made positive identification from his dental records. It was him. His car. His clothes, as far as they could make out. And his dental records verified. My father was dead . . . until that phone call yesterday."

"That's the phone call I want to hear about," Mandrake told her.

"Just like I said, he called and said that he was in terrible danger. He said he could only speak for a few moments, but that I was to fly to Lake Tahoe and find *you.* He told me he'd be doing the same."

"And you're *sure* the call was from your father?" Narda couldn't help asking the obvious but crucial question one more time.

"Positive. I'd know his voice anywhere. And he knew things only Dad could have known. Things about Momma and her death. My first birthday party. Things about the apartment. It was him. I'm sure of that. I flew here elated, all set for a reunion. And now you tell me. . ."

Mandrake felt genuine compassion for the woman. Her emotions had been put through a regular roller coaster ride in the past twenty-four hours. "Miss Lindsay . . . I *believe* that the man who came to see my show last night *was* your father. *And* I believe that the heart attack he supposedly succumbed to was not a heart attack at all. It's my feeling that your father is mixed-up somehow in a very dangerous business. But it's also my feeling that he may still be alive."

"I'm so confused." Jennifer blew her nose into a blue Kleenex from her purse.

Mandrake knew she had good reason to be confused. Her father had been dead, as far as she was concerned, then he had turned up on the telephone, and now he was gone again. Gone. But the county had no record of his body having been delivered anywhere. Patiently, the magician explained the missing file business to the distraught girl. "We'll figure the whole thing out, Miss Lindsay, I promise you that. For better or worse, we'll find out *where* your father is and what has happened to him. I may need to call on you for some help from time to time."

"Anything." She forced a smile.

Alec took over now and explained about the missing file, hinting as to its contents without being explicit. Jennifer, it seemed, had no new information with which to throw light on the subject. All she knew about Arkadian was his name and the fact that he had been funding her father's research for several years, through one of his philanthropic foundations.

When this low-key interrogation was over, Jennifer sat in silence. Only when she realized that everyone in

the car was afraid to speak, out of deference to her emotional state, did she resume the conversation trying to lighten things up.

"You know, my father had been trying to get you into his laboratory for a long time, Mandrake. Your magic really made a dent in his thinking. He'd have given anything to find out how you do it."

"Who wouldn't?" Alec chimed in.

"We'd have a field day examining you."

"I wouldn't want to disappoint you."

"I'm sure you wouldn't." Their eyes met. She was a strange creature, this Jennifer Lindsay. One moment she was the distraught victim of her father's mysterious disappearance, the helpless heroine in a bizarre melodrama. And the next moment she was one hundred percent charm, with her endearingly awkward mannerisms and green-eyed directness. Mandrake was captivated. If asked at this moment, he would have submitted to any examination her psychic researchers' wiles could have devised.

Suddenly, with a screeching of rubber on concrete, the car careened to the left.

"What's going on, Alec?" Narda exclaimed.

"Just checking. That guy's on our tail like white on rice."

Through the car's back window, they could see what Alec meant. Their car *was* being tailed. By a black 1977 Ford. It was driven by a perfectly nondescript dark-haired man with a blank, serious, almost zombie-like expression. And next to him—

"That's the guy from the parking lot," Lothar cried out.

The tattooed man sat in the "death seat" of the black car that hugged their rear bumper, his blank stare fixed, as it had been the night before, several feet in front of him.

"Better step on it," Mandrake ordered Alec. And the chase was on.

The black sedan made a concerted effort to force them off at the four-lane highway.

Alec floored the Agency car, a late model Chrysler. It shot from fifty miles an hour to eighty within seconds.

But the black Ford was no slouch. It matched the acceleration with little or no effort. Within seconds, the tattooed man and his zombie-like "chauffeur" were back on Alec's tail.

"Hang on, folks," Alec called as he took a sudden U-turn into the sparsely populated lane of oncoming traffic.

Horns honked wildly as Alec's vehicle made this outrageous move. A Volkswagon van was sent scurrying to the side of the road to make way for Alec's Chrysler. It only narrowly averted crashing into a metal post.

"Why the hell don't we equip these things with sirens?" Alec muttered under his breath as he accelerated to seventy in his new direction. "Oh my God."

A glance in the rear-view mirror verified that Alec's daredevil U-turn hadn't even begun to shake the Ford. It was gaining fast.

Alec veered into the right-hand lane. As soon as a turn-off presented itself, he took it without bothering to check where it led, which turned out to be a narrow, dangerous stretch of two-lane state highway. Cars were streaming steadily from the opposite direction. There was no place to pass.

The black Ford was on their tail hard again.

A sudden jolt. Alec, Jennifer, Lothar, Narda and Mandrake were thrown forward as the Ford made impact with the rear bumper. The Ford then slowed down to prepare for another knock.

Alec floored it again.

They shot ahead, but so did the Ford.

Now the black car was edging to the left, dangerously close to the oncoming traffic, often traversing the yellow painted line, forcing Alec further right, toward the soft shoulder.

Oncoming traffic was steady. Alec had nowhere to go. On one side was the onrush of approaching vehicles. On the other was a row of tall, sturdy trees. The Ford was nudging him over.

Smack! Another thump from the Ford on the left fender.

The Chrysler went out of control for a moment.

Alec struggled to right things, but it couldn't be done.

Mandrake thrust his arm in front of Jennifer to keep her body from snapping forward as they hit the tree.

In the dizzy moments after the crash, Mandrake took a lightning-fast survey. To all appearances, the entire party was stunned but alive. He unceremoniously climbed over Jennifer to force the door open.

Outside, the two men who had been tailing them were approaching. Both had guns. The highway, which had seemed crowded during the chase a few moments ago, suddenly seemed deserted. Every forty seconds or so, a car would whiz past. But the people in these vehicles didn't seem to notice what was going on.

The tattooed man and his strange accomplice were still approaching on foot down the soft-shoulder. Getting closer.

"Say, if you guys were trying to get our attention, you sure did a great job," Mandrake called to them. "Why don't you put the guns away?"

The tattooed man and his friend just kept on coming, their faces slack-jawed and blank, their guns drawn. They looked like sleepwalkers. Both were in some kind of deadly trance.

Lothar managed to get out of the crashed vehicle and join Mandrake facing their enemies.

Like robots, the two gunmen simultaneously raised

their weapons and aimed. As their arms went up to a dead-level firing position, Mandrake touched the amulet around his neck.

"*By the eternal powers of Theron the Master*!"

The barely audible words were no sooner out than the gunmen heard a truly terrible sound, like the angry roar of a wild beast.

A second later, it registered. A sleek Bengal tiger was stalking them, its deadly jaws open in regal menace, its muscles poised to spring for the kill.

Mandrake and Lothar jumped to the left to avoid the shots the startled gunmen pumped into the beast, aiming straight for the foaming, furious mouth and blazing, deadly teeth.

But their bullets went straight through the advancing tiger. It continued to come toward them.

Two more shots. Both to no avail. The tiger was ready to spring at any moment—ready to run them down and devour! Thrown, rattled, the two men did the only thing they could think of. They turned to run.

Now Lothar, heedless of the beast, sprang forward. He caught the man who had been driving, and with one bone-crushing blow to the jaw, sent him crashing down onto the hot midday asphalt.

The man with the tattoo, however, had made it to the car. He turned the ignition and floored the gas, wildly turning the wheel for a one-hundred-eight-degree turn.

He did not see the magician standing in the road behind him, touching the amulet around his neck.

"*By the eternal powers of Theron the Master.*"

The Bengal tiger vanished as quickly as it had appeared, and in a fraction of a second, a new "miracle" had occurred.

As the man with the tattoo accelerated to sixty miles an hour, he saw that he was in major trouble. There spanning the road before him, was an eight-foot high brick wall. The tattooed man furiously swerved his car

to the right, trying to avoid it. He struggled hard to regain control as he felt the Ford skidding out from under him. It was too late. The car spun out and wrapped its front end around a roadside tree. Smoke poured from the demolished grill. The tattooed man, his forehead bleeding, lay pinned to his seat.

The wall disappeared.

Within an hour, the police had taken custody of the two robot-like attackers. Neither would speak a single syllable. They sat with slack jaws, and blank expressions, staring into space as the police fired questions. Neither uttered a sound as they were harshly ushered into police cars and sped away.

Alec, again in full command of his senses, had ordered two trucks for the ruined vehicles and phoned for an Agency limo—always on hand for situations such as this. Within minutes, the car arrived, driven by an Agency low-down.

"Who *were* those men?" Jennifer finally got up the nerve to ask as they drove back toward the hotel.

"One of them was the guy who left the showroom in such a hurry, right after your father collapsed. He tried to use Lothar as an exit ramp, out in the hotel parking lot."

"Were they after Lothar?"

"Who knows," was all Mandrake could answer. "Maybe Lothar, maybe you, maybe me. Who knows? But we're gonna find out."

"They didn't seem human. They were like . . . I don't know . . . something out of a movie. 'The Living Dead,' or something. Like they were. . ."

"Hypnotized," Mandrake finished.

There was a brief silence. Everyone let it sink in. Finally, Jennifer spoke up again.

"So where do we go from here? How do we find my father?"

"Well, that's two questions," Mandrake replied. "First, Narda will keep her investigation going. She'll keep calling to try and find out where a body might have been taken in an ambulance from my show last night. And second, I'm going to take you home to San Francisco."

"But I took a leave from the University," Jennifer protested. "I want to help you find my father . . . if he's alive."

"That's why we're off to San Francisco."

"What's there?"

"We're going to pay a little visit to someone whose name we've heard a lot in the past few days."

Narda and Lothar chimed in from the back seat in perfect unison.

"Arkadian."

"Right," said the magician as they pulled into the hotel parking lot.

"Okay, Mandrake," said Alec as they started to emerge from the limo. "You're off to San Francisco in your Learjet tonight, am I right?"

"Right."

"So it looks like you've taken the case."

"Looks like it." Mandrake glanced at Jennifer.

"So just answer me this," Alec continued. "How do you do it? Some day I'm going to figure it out anyway, so why not just tell me and make it simple. The tigers . . . the walls . . . how the hell do you pull that stuff? I mean, there's no doubt in my mind that you've got some kind of special power or super force or something that allows you to pull those shenanigans, but *Real Magic*? I can't buy it, Mandrake."

The magician said nothing. Lothar and Narda got out of the limo. They'd heard Alec's inquisition a thousand times. And they'd heard the answer a thousand and *one* times. They joined Jennifer and started for the hotel.

"Come on, Mandrake," Alec called. "How do you do it? Tell me."

"But Alec," Mandrake turned with a smile. "If I told you, it wouldn't be magic!"

IV

The Second Annual Miss International Beauty Pageant was only thirty-six hours away. The hotel that would be its home had been in an uproar for a week, long before the first contestant had arrived.

Employees of Arkadian Enterprises, the company sponsoring the huge event, had swarmed over the hotel like locusts, checking everything from telephone systems to security. Word had gone out from Raymond Arkadian himself that this year's pageant was to make Miss Universe look like a Danville, Illinois prom queen. Arkadian had decided that *his* show would be the best. And to Arkadian, "best" had one definition. Biggest.

So it was that the International Hotel brimmed with glamour and excitement. Red roses by the bushel. Ringing telephones. Messengers of all shapes and sizes, scurrying from room to room and floor to floor, keeping communications up-to-the-minute between the contestants, the creative staff, the television crews, the press, and the omnipresent Arkadian representatives who oversaw the entire affair.

First priority, of course, went to everything that would be seen on camera the following night. The lavish sets had been completed, but the contestants were still being put through grueling paces. Raymond Arkadian had sent out a decree. There was to be no amateurishness visible when that nationwide hookup went into action. The Miss International contestants had to sing like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, dance like the Rock-

ettes, and perform in unison like a Marine drill team. And, oh yes—they had to look ravishing at the same time.

At the first dress rehearsal, yesterday, Arkadian had dispensed with one-piece bathing suits.

"What do you think this is, Miss America?" he had been heard to bellow. "I want *skin.* I want every one of those girls in a string bikini!"

Within hours, fifty identical string bikinis had arrived.

This afternoon was to be devoted to a massive rehearsal. The auditorium sounded like a musical battle zone. An orchestra was tuning up, a rehearsal piano was banging out the pageant's opening number, and fifty female voices were raised in another tune: "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody." In the center of this cacaphony stood the man who had made it all happen. Raymond Arkadian.

"French," he called to his male secretary. "Come here and bring your legal pad. I need you to jot down a few things."

Raymond Arkadian barked orders like other people say "Good morning." Complete control was second nature to him. He wore his power extremely well. He rarely raised his voice above a quiet conversational level, but he knew how to place emphasis in exactly the right place, down to the syllable. With just a raised eyebrow and a slightly stressed "now," he could set hundreds of people scrambling to do his bidding. He knew it. He liked it. He used it with elegance and grace.

Physically, Arkadian was everything *The Star* had said he was. Tall. Chiseled features. An athletic build that belied his fifty-one years. His hair, which had once been light brown, was now shot through with silver. Its metallic gleam, combined with the bronze glow of his perpetual tan, made him seem almost supernatural. A god cast out of metal. Larger than life. That was Raymond Arkadian.

"I want that ramp raised eighteen inches."

French scribbled furiously as Arkadian dictated. "Double-check those press accommodations and make sure that everyone is present, accounted for, and *happy*. Mostly happy. There were a few gripers last year who threw the publicity off on the whole pageant. I want those columnists to love us. What did RBA open at?"

French looked up from his pad. "Eleven at eleven-and-a-half."

"Sell," Arkadian stated simply as he moved toward the stage.

"How many shares?"

"All of it." The tycoon mounted the stage platform and began taking a close look at the plexiglass "environment" the designers had created for the first production number. "Sell all of it. Buy back at ten, and sell again at twelve. Got it?"

"Got it." French ripped a sheet from the top of his pad, clipped it to another sheaf of papers, licked the tip of his pencil, and continued to write.

"Have my New York reservations been confirmed?" Arkadian now gazed into the clear plexiglass piano the set designers had had created especially for the climax of the segment.

"Yes, Mr. Arkadian, your suite at The Plaza will be ready at eight o'clock Monday morning."

"Cancel it. I'm going to London instead."

French nodded and scribbled faster.

Several hundred feet away, twenty-five girls started rehearsing the pageant's theme song, newly composed for the occasion by a famous Broadway composer.

"Hello, Miss International!
Let's go, Miss International!
On a magic trip around the world. . ."

Arkadian paused for a moment, pleased with what he heard. The song, with its faintly disco beat, would get

things off to a perfect start.

"Now, I want to double-check security arrangements. Send Schultz to me."

"Yes, Mr. Arkadian."

French moved to the back of the auditorium, where George Schultz, Chief of Security for Arkadian Enterprises, stood watching the proceedings. Somehow, Schultz didn't seem to enter into the spirit of things. An austere figure in a dark blue suit, his mind seemed to be elsewhere. His stare as he took in the pageant proceedings could not disguise a hint of contempt for everything he saw before him.

When French interrupted his reverie, Schultz jumped a little. When he heard that "the boss" had summoned him, he gave forth with a miniscule sneer and started down toward the stage.

"Schultz," Arkadian called. "Brief me on security, please."

"Taken care of," Schultz replied simply.

"Taken care of?" Something flashed in Arkadian's eyes. "What does that mean?"

"Standard procedure. Same as last year."

"Am I hearing things?" The few people who overheard Arkadian now fell silent in fear. It was clear that "the boss" was angry. And although his voice stayed low-key, his entire demeanor changed.

"I sent you a series of memos detailing *specific* changes I wanted from last year. A set of specific, detailed changes in the security routine for the pageant. *A series of memos,* Schultz, and you ignored them?"

"I weighed them carefully, Mr. Arkadian, and made my own evaluation of our security needs." Schultz was cool. Everyone around Arkadian Enterprises had always said the man would be more at home on Madison Avenue. Something in the slick, laid-back demeanor. The conservatism. The perpetual dark blue

suits. The faint mockery behind everything he said.

"My evaluation was that last year's procedures would be sufficient for this year's pageant. That's all. And I put those procedures into effect based on my decision."

"Your decision," Arkadian repeated, weighing what was being said to him and the manner in which it was being presented.

"Mine. I *am* Chief of Security."

"Wrong," Arkadian returned with a smile. "You *were* Chief of Security. I want you out of this auditorium in fifteen seconds, out of this hotel in fifteen minutes, out of San Francisco in an hour and out of Arkadian Enterprises effective immediately. Try that on for size, Schultz. Now go."

"Whatever you say, Mr. Arkadian," Schultz replied with a small nod of his head. He didn't seem terribly concerned. He simply turned and started up the aisle. As Schultz got to the back of the auditorium, he stopped for a moment to notice four newcomers who had entered the theatre—Mandrake, Lothar, Narda, and Jennifer Lindsay. He took them in, smiled to himself, and left through the double doors at the back of the house.

"Do we know him?" Lothar asked Mandrake.

"Not personally. Not yet," Mandrake murmured softly as the four made their way down the aisle of the auditorium, to the spot where Raymond Arkadian stood with John French.

"You'll have to fill in for a while, French," Arkadian was telling his secretary. "Just keep an eye on security arrangements until this evening. By then I'll have appointed a new security head for the pageant. Meanwhile, you could. . ."

Arkadian stopped speaking when he noticed Mandrake and company standing a few feet away. French saw them too, and not recognizing a single face immediately asked a curt, "May I help you?"

"That'll be all for now, French," Arkadian interrupted him, extending a hand toward Mandrake. "Mandrake, isn't it?"

"That's right. How are you, Mr. Arkadian?"

"Just fine," the tycoon replied as they shook hands. "Alec Gordon phoned me to say you'd be arriving. I caught your show in Las Vegas a couple of years ago. Incredible. I'm sure everyone who meets you asks, but do you think you could demonstrate. . ."

"You're right, everyone asks," Mandrake interrupted with a smile.

"And you answer—"

"Well, that depends," Mandrake replied. "First I return their watches." The magician handed the thousand-dollar digital watch that moments before had graced the millionaire's wrist. Arkadian was dumbfounded.

"How did you. . ."

"Same way I got your wallet."

Arkadian felt his inner breast pocket of his jacket. Empty. He glanced at Mandrake who now extended the leather billfold with a chuckle.

"Will that do in the demonstration department?"

"Please," Arkadian laughed. "I can't afford much more."

"Then let me introduce my associates, Lothar and Narda," Mandrake continued. "And this is Jennifer Lindsay."

"How do you do?"

"I feel as if we've met before, Mr. Arkadian," offered Jennifer. "My father and I worked on a research grant from the Foundation."

"Dr. Malcolm Lindsay . . . the Stanford University project," Arkadian said softly. "I was very sorry to hear about the accident."

Mandrake spoke up. "We have reason to believe that Dr. Lindsay may still be alive, Mr. Arkadian. If you and I could talk for a moment—"

Arkadian and Mandrake moved away from the crowd to the first row of audience seats. Lothar, Narda, and Jennifer began to take in the pageant rehearsal onstage. A choreographer was putting the girls through some pretty strenuous paces.

"Okay, I want to try that last combination again, ladies. Doubletime," the dance coach shouted. John French tapped the choreographer on the shoulder.

"Mr. Arkadian mentioned to me this morning, Jack, that he was anxious that the union rules be strictly observed. Are the girls getting their ten-minute break every hour?" French was making notes on his yellow pad, even as he spoke.

"But none of these girls *belongs* to a union," the choreographer insisted. "They're all amateurs."

"Not as far as Mr. Arkadian's concerned, Jack," French replied. "See that they get their breaks, please. And another thing. . ."

A uniformed security guard tapped French on the shoulder. "Telephone for you, Mr. French."

"For me?" The secretary was surprised. His role in the pageant proceedings was, by his own admission, fairly unimportant. Who would be calling him here? "I'll be right there."

"You can take it at the phone center in the lobby," the guard added as he walked away.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," French told the choreographer as he turned to take the call. He made his way quickly to the makeshift communications center that had been set up in the auditorium's large foyer.

"Phone number three," an attendant called, as French entered the communications area. French put the receiver to his ear and said hello.

On the other end of the phone there was only breathing.

"Hello?" the secretary said again.

"John French?" The voice that spoke was muffled

and nasal, as if it were being electronically reconstructed as it spoke.

"Speaking."

"John French, I've got a message for you."

"Go ahead. What is it?"

"Please listen carefully. I can only say this once."

"Look, is this some kind of a joke?" French was annoyed. "What is it you want?"

"To give you this message. Listen carefully."

French was ready to hang up. He fully expected a string of obscenities.

"All right," the electronically muted voice returned. "John French . . . Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party."

As the words made their imprint on John French's consciousness, his entire body responded as if triggered by an electrode. His jaw went slack. The facial muscles relaxed and his eyes glazed over. He stared ahead of him. He was silent. From the other end of the telephone came the sound of a quick hang-up, and then a dial tone. The receiver fell from French's hand. He did not bother to hang it up. He started slowly, deliberately walking back into the auditorium.

"Mr. French, are you finished?" the phone center attendant called, as French walked away. "Do you want me to hang that up?"

But French did not respond. He kept walking in silence toward the auditorium.

"Mr. French?" The attendant just shrugged and hung up the phone. All of these Arkadian people were nuts, he thought to himself. Nuts.

Meanwhile, John French located the brown attache case he had left in the back of the auditorium and the small gold key that unlocked it.

In the first row of the auditorium, Mandrake and Arkadian still sat engrossed in conversation. They talked softly, for each other's benefit only. Arkadian

had just filled Mandrake in on the activities of the *Seaview,* his explorer ship in Honolulu. It was about to embark on Operation Domino, the raising of the sunken Russian intelligence submarine. The recovery mission was scheduled to begin the very next morning.

"Is there a cover story?" Mandrake asked.

"Deep sea mining of ocean resources," the millionaire replied.

"But the facts, the *real* facts of the mission are detailed in the missing file?"

"Everything. Whoever has that file has me—and the Agency—by the neck, Mandrake. The intelligence community pays good money for my help and I've always delivered discreetly. A leak like this could ruin the entire relationship. As a businessman, you can understand that I'd prefer *not* to have my government contracts broadcast to the entire world."

"You're convinced that the theft of the file was an inside job?"

"Had to be." Arkadian shifted in his seat. The topic made him understandably uncomfortable. "Mandrake, they knew not only the location of the file and the layout of my office. They knew how to bypass the security system!"

"Who's your chief of security?"

"I don't have one. I just fired George Schultz, who used to do that job for me. Ripping me off for years. I should have thrown him out eight years ago. He's a prime suspect, of course."

"Of course," Mandrake replied. "This is his picture, isn't it?" The magician took a small, billfold-like leather case from his pocket.

"You Agency guys do your homework, don't you?" Arkadian was impressed.

"We try," Mandrake smiled. "There are a few other suspects here, too. Just verify for me, please, that these are the names that go with the pictures." The two men

huddled together and began to check the contents of Mandrake's tiny portfolio.

Sounds of the pageant rehearsal filled the backstage area. Tapping feet on the stage floor, the rehearsal piano, the shouted directions of the harried choreographer, the technical chatter of television teams, reporters with cassette recorders interviewing nervous contestants. But in the mind of John French, all was silence save one phrase. It rang between his temples like a repeating shot, over and over relentlessly.

"Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party."

He moved by rote, as if by habit. As if he had taken these very steps before. Through a heavy metal fire door. Down one flight of stairs. To a basement-like enclosure below the stage itself.

Upstairs, in the first row of the audience, Mandrake and Raymond Arkadian continued to persue the photos of various employees under suspicion. After George Schultz, the recently demoted security head, was an inventor who claimed Arkadian had stolen plans for an explorer ship.

"Is that true?" Mandrake inquired.

"The courts will decide," Arkadian answered calmly, a man who was used to legal proceedings *and* to answering questions about them.

"Anyway, this guy's an enemy?" Mandrake reitereated.

"You know, Mandrake," Arkadian confessed, "when you're in my kind of business, half the world's your enemy. For starters, there are three ex-wives floating around California, any one of whom would have me shot between the eyes in a second, if she thought it would mean inheriting what I own."

"I'm sure," Mandrake said with a nod. "I'm sure."

* * *

Not six feet above his head, lines of girls were kicking up a storm to the strains of a Broadway-style number.

"This time
Will be the *best* time!"

John French didn't hear a note of it. His attention was totally fixed on a brown attache case and a small gold key. He fit the key into the lock. One quick turn. The case opened.

"Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party."

The words drowned out the beauty pageant and everything it stood for. Nothing in the world existed but this briefcase. And the plastic explosives it contained.

"William Romero." Mandrake spoke the name as he pointed to the picture of a handsome, gray-haired man.

"Fired as a vice president two years ago," Arkadian answered. "I haven't seen him since and I don't know anyone who has. After I fired him, he filed suit claiming breach of contract. Thrown out of court. That's when he disappeared. Dropped off the face of the earth, as far as I can tell."

French stared at the timer. The dial moved slowly but steadily toward the designated point. He double-checked his wires with a quick glance. Perfect. He retained his crouched position and continued to stare, slack-jawed and blank-eyed, at the device.

"Okay, girls, take ten," called the choreographer. Mandrake and Arkadian both looked up at the sound of his voice and smiled at the array of beauties leaving the stage. The girls filtered down into the house to chat for a few minutes, to have a Coke, or to take a quick rest. All except Miss Indiana, who sat onstage dipping a plastic spoon into a container of strawberry yogurt. Af-

ter their moment of girl-watching, Mandrake and Arkadian returned to the subject at hand.

"Dr. Malcolm Lindsay," Mandrake said, displaying one last picture to Arkadian.

"Is he dead or alive?"

"We don't know yet," Mandrake replied. "Does he have a motive for wanting to ruin you? Is there a reason *he* would have stolen the file?"

"Well," Arkadian began, stroking his chin. "I don't think his daughter is aware of it, but the Foundation *did* make a decision to move out of psychic research and into some more—shall we say—conventional forms of medical work. About a month before Lindsay died, he had been informed that his grant was to be suspended."

Mandrake let that sink in for a moment. "Well, that about wraps up my prime contender list," he said finally, folding the mini-portfolio. "There's just one more thing I think you should know. I believe Malcolm Lindsay tried to contact me yesterday. I believe he came to my show in Tahoe to find me. And I believe he was trying to tell me something when he had his collapse. He only had a chance to whisper one word to me before he lost consciousness. Or died. I don't know which. But I do know what the word was, Mr. Arkadian. Your name."

"My name?"

"Arkadian. That's what he whispered. That's part of what the man was trying to tell me."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Arkadian asked simply, with no trace of defensiveness.

"You tell me, friend," Mandrake replied with equal simplicity. "You tell me."

The next thing that registered to either of them was the sound. Like a gunshot magnified a thousand times. A roar of eardrum-smashing force that came from below the stage area and was echoed by the sounds of ripping wood and metal crashing onto metal. An earth-

quake roar. A wrenching explosion.

Arkadian hadn't heard anything like it since the war, but his reflexes were intact. He hit the ground, face down, within a fraction of a second. Mandrake did the same, shielding Arkadian with his own body. Narda, Lothar, and Jennifer at the back of the auditorium were safely out of range. They saw it happen.

First, a mammoth cloud of dust, smoke, and sawdust came erupting through the stage itself, ripping a crater-sized hole in the floor. Plexiglass set pieces twenty feet tall came crashing like toy blocks, some disappearing through the gaping, flaming hole—and some tumbling out over the first rows of audience. Enormous metal poles which had supported heavy lighting instruments came tumbling like ancient oaks from all directions. And where they hit the stage floor, with resounding crashes like small explosions themselves, they crushed everything in their way. Miss Indiana screamed as the metal column pulverized her legs.

Within moments, the Miss International Pageant had become a small-scale holocaust. Contestants, their mothers, the Arkadian staff, people of all shapes and sizes went screaming through the auditorium. Alarm sirens went off. Several flash fires started almost simultaneously onstage where electrical connections had been ripped by the explosion. And flames from the fire under the stage licked upward, threatening to incinerate anything in their way.

Mandrake crawled to the edge of the stage and looked up. Slowly, he drew himself to his feet. If another explosion were to follow, he decided, there wouldn't be much he could do about it anyway. Meanwhile, there was plenty of work to be done. The building staff had already made its way to the major fire below and was attacking it with extinguishers until the fire trucks could arrive. Before long, Lothar was at Mandrake's side. Together they enlisted the aid of several security men to

pull the column of metal off the trapped Miss Indiana, who lay unconscious but breathing beneath it. It looked as if she might be the only serious injury, having been the only person onstage, directly above the source of the blast.

The other human damage was shortly verified to be minor. Jennifer and Narda helped tend to myriad cuts and abrasions, but the real medical problem in the auditorium was shock. Who on earth would sabotage a beauty pageant? And why? Half of the contestants were in tears. The others were simply stunned.

Surveying the wreckage, Raymond Arkadian was noticeably shaken. The explosion had done more than rend his stage in two. It had also made a dent in the millionaire's seemingly impenetrable cool.

Shortly after the fire trucks and ambulances arrived, he moved to a spot on what was left of the stage platform, where Mandrake helped an ambulance team get Miss Indiana onto a stretcher.

"I guess it's all tied together, right?" He spoke from over Mandrake's left shoulder. The magician turned.

"What do *you* think?"

"I think I'm gonna spend as much as I have to, bust as many heads as I need to to get this pageant on tomorrow night, no matter what happened here just now. I'm gonna show these people, whoever they are, that we're not going to be intimidated."

Mandrake touched Arkadian on the shoulder. "That's not a bad idea, but why don't you relax for a few minutes. Pull it all together before you start making decisions." He paused for a moment. Someone caught his eye. "Jennifer!"

The scientist's daughter had left her first-aid post and was now engrossed with a fire extinguisher, trying to figure out how it worked.

"Jennifer, I don't know how safe it is for you to be

fooling around up here," Mandrake called as he went over to her.

"You mean you don't know how safe it is for me to be fooling around with a fire extinguisher," she answered. Before the words were even completely formed, the extinguisher had started squirting—blasting an ambulance driver's back. Jennifer managed to stop it before it did further damage. "Well, it looked like that pile of costumes was still smoldering and I thought I'd. . ." She looked at Mandrake sheepishly. "Yeah, I know. I'm a klutz. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." They exchanged a look of equal relief. Silently it was acknowledged in their first moment together since the explosion that the stakes in this entire game had just been raised considerably.

"Mr. Arkadian," a fire chief called from the edge of the stage. "May I see you a moment?"

Arkadian moved to the elderly firefighter.

"It looks as if there's been a casualty. Appears it's a member of your staff. We'll need you to identify."

"Fine," replied Arkadian, following the chief.

It took them several minutes to reach the basement destination. They had to reach the below-stage area through the only access route that wasn't blocked by rubble and debris, a narrow hall that led downstairs from under the lobby. When they finally reached the area in question, they had to step over a soggy mass of hosed-down insulation and a sopping pile of charred beams and loose brick. Soon, Arkadian could make out the figure of a man's body. It had been crushed under huge pieces of plexiglass that had fallen through the chasm in the stage. The lower extremities had been blown completely away. The face, however, was recognizable. Arkadian knew it at once.

"Do you have any idea what he could have been doing down here?" asked the chief.

"He could have been doing anything," Arkadian answered. "Checking the dressing room access, the sound system. He could have been en route to the auditorium from the pressroom. He could have been doing anything. The man was my personal secretary. My detail person."

"His name?" asked the Chief.

"John French."

V

The bar was a tourist spot, not three blocks from the Honolulu dock where the Seaview, an explorer ship owned by Arkadian Enterprises, was docked. This was Walter Kevan's first trip to Hawaii as a merchant seaman. In fact, this was his first trip to Hawaii period. In the "real Navy" he'd gotten as far as Long Beach.

For years, Walter had heard you could make out like a bandit on the islands. He had come to *Marie's Tahiti Grill* to find out if it was true. Walter and a couple of mates had been disappointed when they first arrived. The place was all but deserted. Consequently, they had decided to stay for one beer and then move on to find the action. Midway through the suds, however, a party of college girls had sauntered in. A tour group from some girls' school in the midwest. It was all the excuse the guys needed to stay on a little while.

Before long, they had paired off. Walter sat with Cindy Willis at a corner table away from the group.

"Sea duty ain't half as bad as it sounds, you know. We get a lot of pretty bad PR, but it has its advantages. Lots of traveling . . ."

"A girl in every port?" Cindy grinned. If her mother back in St. Louis ever dreamed she was sitting in a bar called *Marie's Tahiti* having drinks with *a sailor,* no less! And a sailor as cute as this one! Cindy felt right at home beside Walter's clean-cut, All-American good looks. He seemed less like her idea of a merchant seaman than like her idea of a Senior Class president. His skin was so

scrubbed and healthy . . . and the freckles. A real wholesome sort of guy. There couldn't be any harm in flirting with him a little. "I'll bet you've got 'em lined up from here to Singapore." She was sure she'd heard that in a movie.

"Who me? Are you kidding? They don't keep us in one place long enough to get a phone number, let alone to meet somebody and, well, you know—get it on. They weren't kiddin' when they said I'd see the world."

"But you're not a government ship, are you?"

"No, this isn't the *real* Navy. It's an explorer ship. Deep sea diving and all. You know. Arkadian Enterprises owns it, but we work on a lot of government contracts. Real important stuff." He put on a mockingly serious face. Cindy couldn't help laughing.

"Well, if you're not in the *real* Navy, maybe I shouldn't spend much time with you. After all, my reputation . . ."

"Hey, I told you. I *was* in the real Navy. No kidding. You want to see my tattoo?"

They both broke up. He was going to get one heck of a reaction later, he was sure, when she found out he really *did* have one. All of the guys in his U.S. Navy training group had gotten tattooed one night. For a few months after his discharge, Walter had toyed with having it removed. But he had finally decided that a "conversation piece" never hurt.

Walter was about to ask Cindy if she'd like to go for a walk when the Polynesian waitress came to their table.

"Excuse me," the waitress said softly. "Your friends said that you're Walter Kevan."

"That's me."

"There is a long distance phone call for you in the back."

Walter was surprised. No one knew he was in Honolulu, let alone at *Marie's*. "That's impossible. You're sure they asked for me?"

"Yes sir. Long distance. In the back."

The waitress went back to the bar. Walter turned to Cindy. "Say, this is weird. It's probably some kind of mistake. I'll be back in a minute. If you go anywhere, you're in big trouble. Sit. Don't move. Stay." He dropped the macho put-on. "Please," he grinned. She grinned back. Yessir, Walter Kevan told himself, there'll be some wicki-wacki in Honolulu tonight.

Cindy watched him go through the door to the back part of the bar. She had no intention of going anywhere except with Mr. Kevan. No indeed.

When Walter got to the telephone and picked up the receiver, at first he heard only breathing.

"Hello?"

"Walter Kevan?" A nasal, electronically muffled voice came at him over the wire.

"Yeah, this is Walter Kevan. Who is . . ."

"I've got a message for you, Walter Kevan. Please listen carefully. I can only say this once."

"What is this? A game show?" Walter joked with the strange voice, but he was genuinely baffled.

"Walter Kevan, now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party."

It took a moment for the words to register. Then Walter Kevan's jaw went slack. His eyes glazed over. He stared. He started into the front room of the bar, oblivious to everything and everyone around him. The receiver of the telephone just dangled where Walter had dropped it.

In front, Cindy saw Walter emerge. She smiled. "So who did it turn out to . . ."

Well *that* was nice. He was walking straight past her, as if he hadn't heard a word. "Walter . . ."

He just kept walking. Past his friends, too engrossed in flirtations of their own to notice. Out the front door. Into the Honolulu night.

"I don't believe it," Cindy said aloud, unconcerned

that she was speaking to no one in particular. "I just don't." Tears welled up. Cindy Willis adjourned to the Ladies Room.

At the site of the Miss International Pageant, the police had arrived to take statements. A coroner's wagon had come for the body of John French, and reporters now swarmed over everything.

"Mr. Arkadian," begged one particularly impetuous young man with a microphone, "why do you think anybody would want to do this? Have you got any idea?"

"First of all, get that thing out of my face," Arkadian barked. "And second of all, no. No, I have no idea who or how or why. But I'm sure we'll all find out in good time." He brushed the reporter aside and made his way to a makeshift office he had ordered set up in one corner of the lobby. Mandrake was there, on the phone to Alec Gordon at the Agency.

"Any word on those two clowns who tried to ice us yesterday?" he demanded into the receiver. "Did anybody ever get them to talk?"

"Not a syllable," Alec replied. They're still acting like congenital mutes. Even the police say it's the weirdest case they ever saw. The guys are both something like catatonic."

"Have you found out who they are yet."

"Nothing. There's not a mark on them to give that away. Neither one was carrying any I.D. Not so much as a matchbook. Craziest damned thing you ever saw."

"You've taken prints, of course." Mandrake was getting impatient.

"Of course. They're being run through the computer now. If we come up with anything—"

"You'll let me know. Thanks, Alec." Mandrake hung up. "How are you making out with the press?" The question was directed to Arkadian who, by this time, had poured himself a stiff Jack Daniels, straight.

"They're driving me crazy, but so far I've fended them off. You want a shot?" He proferred the bottle to Mandrake.

"No thanks. Interferes with my work."

"You can't perform magic with a couple of drinks in you?"

"It's not the magic. It's what the magic comes from that. . . . It's hard and lengthy to explain. Another time, okay?"

"Sure," said Arkadian, silently toasting the thought with a raised glass and taking a deep swallow. Narda entered the makeshift office area.

"Mr. Arkadian . . ."

"Yes?"

"Security tells me there's a call for you at the communications center across the foyer. They can't seem to figure out how to have it switched in here." Narda shrugged apologetically.

"Of course they can't. Do you have any idea what the phone setup around here is costing me? Of course they can't figure out a simple thing like that!" He realized he was raving. "Excuse me. I'll be right back." Arkadian left the office and headed for the communications center across the foyer.

"Phone number three, Mr. Arkadian," called the sole attendant as she left the area. Arkadian employees knew better than to wait for the boss to demand his privacy.

Arkadian picked up the phone with his usual, brisk manner. "Yes?"

"Raymond Arkadian?"

The voice on the other end was nasal. Muffled. From his experiences with the Agency, Arkadian recognized the tonal quality of the call at once. Someone was using an electronic device on the other end to disguise the caller's voice. Even voice prints would not be able to unscramble the sounds as they came across the wire. It was the telephone equivalent of wearing gloves to avoid

leaving fingerprints. Arkadian spoke quietly, carefully. "Yes, this is Arkadian."

"How did you enjoy your little blast?"

Arkadian's heart started pounding. He tried to measure his words and his tone of voice. "Who is this?"

"I could have waited until the nationwide hookup was in place and primetime viewers across America were tuned in to your Miss International shindig, but I frankly got impatient. I wanted you to have a taste of what was coming. That blast was just for you, Arkadian. Your own personal explosion. Next time we'll go public. How about that?"

"What are you? Some kind of maniac?" Arkadian couldn't help it. The words came tumbling out.

"What do you think, Arkadian? Am I?"

"A man was killed. An innocent man. And a woman will probably be crippled for the rest of her life!" The anger was pouring out of him now, all of the emotion he had kept pent up under the supercool exterior burst forth. "I don't know who or what you are, but I know what you've done and I swear you'll . . ."

"Don't make me mad, Arkadian. I'm not to be messed around with, as you can see."

"Who are you?!"

The electronic voice laughed. "Why would I want to tell you that? That would spoil half the fun."

Arkadian waited a moment and tried to collect himself. "What do you want, then?"

"That would spoil the other half. You'll find out what I want. Soon enough."

"Tell me what you want!"

"When I'm ready to tell you, I will. Don't worry, Arkadian. We'll be speaking to one another. You can count on that. But in the meantime, I think you'd better forget about your little top-secret project in Hawaii."

"What are you talking about?"

"Come off it, Arkadian. We *both* know that I'm talk-

ing about the *Seaview.* You can forget about that mission. About raising the Russian sub for the Agency."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Okay, Arkadian. Play games if you want to. But *this* is no game. That ship isn't going to make it, Arkadian. It's not even going to make it out of Honolulu!"

The *Seaview* was all but deserted. Most of its crew was ashore, but on a high-security project like this one, a few men had to stay behind to keep an eye on things. Most important, someone had to check the comings and goings of each person involved with the ship. A security station had been set up to screen everyone, crew members included, as they boarded.

Walter Kevan approached the security station wearing the same blank expression with which he had left *Marie's.*

"Hey Walt, how's it goin'?" called the burly sailor manning the station. "What're you doing back so early?"

Walter didn't say anything. He stared into space and automatically took out his identification papers.

"Wow, you're really wrecked, huh? Hawaiian weed must be something else." The burly security officer laughed as he checked Walter's card. "Yessir, you look blown away, if you dig my meaning. Bee-lone A-way!"

If Walter Kevan had been thinking as himself, he might have noticed that this was exactly the condition the security guard himself was in. But Walter was in no shape to make any such observation. One sentence kept repeating itself in his mind, over and over like a broken record. "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party."

"Okay, Kevan, you can come aboard. And if you've got any sense, you'll go below and mellow out, man. You look freaked."

Walter Kevan walked straight past the ex-hippie

turned merchant marine and made his way, slowly and deliberately, to his cabin. The words were pounding in his mind now, loud and rhythmic as music in a disco. The words pressed him forward. "Now is the time. Now is the time."

When Walter arrived at the cabin he shared with five other guys, he went straight to his bunk. On a trunk next to his bed was a copy of *Sports Illustrated.* He picked up the magazine without even looking at it and knelt down to reach under the bed. He felt under the low cot until his hand touched metal. He reached a little further and pulled it out: a lunch pail. An old-fashioned hardhat's gray tin lunchbox.

Walter Kevan took the lunchbox and the magazine and started for the ship's engine room.

"Mandrake, I need you . . . alone." Raymond Arkadian had entered the Pageant office area, visibly shaken.

Without a word, the magician rose and followed him out into a corner of the corridor.

"I just received a call from the man who blew up the stage. Or the man who was behind it. I know you think that French set off the explosives, but I . . ."

"Go on. About the call," the magician demanded.

"I couldn't place the voice. He was using an electronic device of some kind to disguise the sound. You know those things, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's all, really. Except that he said he'd be back in touch to tell me what he wanted. And that he made threats on my explorer ship in Hawaii. He knew all about Project Domino."

"Which means he's had access to the file," Mandrake added, stroking his five o'clock shadow.

"Which means just that. And which also means I've got to get on the phone to Honolulu and tighten security at the ship. Right away." The thought had seized Arka-

dian all at once. He was furious with himself for not doing anything minutes sooner. Every second might count. He had no way of knowing.

In the engine room, Walter was oblivious to the whirring sounds around him. The phrase that ran between his ears drowned out everything. Almost like a chant now, the words kept playing and replaying themselves, and more than ever Walter felt as if he were moving in time to a rhythm they created. It was to the tune of this song without a melody that he took the plastic explosives out of his gray metal lunchbox, planted them, inserted the detonator with total precision, and carefully set the timer for one minute. Walter Kevan was a perfectionist.

The timer began to move, the little dial inching its way toward the mark. Walter didn't smile. He took in his handiwork with the same slack jaw, the same dead stare that had held his face ever since the phone call in the back of the bar. The words. The sound of the timer. Walter picked up his copy of *Sports Illustrated.* As he looked at the picture of Billie Jean King which graced the cover, the words in his mind receded slightly. He glanced up at the timer. Forty seconds. He flipped the magazine open to the story about Ms. King of whom he had long been a fan. He started to read.

The *Seaview's* Chief Officer picked up his telephone on the third ring. He was shocked to hear the long-distance voice of a man he had never met.

"This is Raymond Arkadian."

"Himself?" asked the officer.

"Himself and we don't have any time to beat around the bush. I've had a threat phoned in to me. A threat to destroy the ship. I want the thing evacuated this minute and I want . . ."

In San Francisco, Raymond Arkadian heard a

thunderclap-like noise over the phone.

"Hello? Hello?" He dropped the receiver and waited for his stomach to settle.

In Honolulu, the *Seaview's* chief officer escaped without injury, which was something of a miracle. An explosion had ripped his ship's engine room in two. It had done the same to a copy of *Sports Illustrated.* And the tattooed body of a young sailor named Walter Kevan.

VI

As soon as he was told about the explosion in Hawaii, Mandrake realized he would have to get to Honolulu fast, before the trail to the *Seaview* terrorist had been obscured. He decided to use his Agency Learjet to make the trip. Lothar would copilot. They would be there within hours.

Narda was dispatched back to Tahoe to continue the investigation there. The names of the two strong silent types who had tailed Alec's car that day on the highway had yet to be discovered. Narda was assigned to work directly with the local authorities, checking up to make sure that no valuable information had been obtained but not recognized. The smallest clue—a street number—anything would be more to go on than they had at present.

Mandrake had suggested that Jennifer accompany Narda back to Tahoe and then return to San Francisco to try to put her life back in order. Jennifer, of course, had refused.

"I'm coming to Honolulu with you and that's all there is to it. Ouch," she had declared, bruising her shin on a chair in the restaurant where they had had a quick lunch. "The klutz is coming with you, Mandrake. I promise not to try to fly the plane. I can't go back to work anyway. How could I concentrate on anything until I know about my father? One way or another." The magician had reluctantly agreed.

Flying conditions en route to Hawaii were everything

they could have asked for. Mandrake was able to keep up frequent radio contact with Alec Gordon at Agency headquarters.

"What's you E.T.A. Honolulu?" Alec asked on one of the transmissions.

"Nine A.M. Anything more in the way of immediate suspects on the *Seaview* explosion?"

"Not really. But the Honolulu police know you're coming. A Sergeant Ho will meet you at the airport. He says he thinks he'll have a little more to go on by then."

"Here's hoping," Mandrake radioed. "Listen, I'm going to need more information on all of the names you gave me. The guys I had mugshots on."

"George Schultz, William Romero, and friends." In his office, Alec made a note of this. "Right. I'll wire dossiers to Honolulu. They'll be there a few hours after you arrive. You questioned Arkadian about them?"

"Sure did. The man's got enough legitimate enemies to start a war."

Jennifer had been listening from just over his shoulder. She touched Mandrake's arm. He was keenly aware of her closeness.

"Ask him if there's anything more on my father, Mandrake."

"Alec," Mandrake began. "Has Narda phoned in any new info on the showroom incident?"

"I don't even think she's in Tahoe yet. But I do have this much from the police there. No doctor can be located who even remotely fits the description of the man who examined the victim." There was a pause. "Miss Lindsay is with you, isn't she?"

"Yes, Alec," Mandrake replied.

"Did you question Arkadian about her father?"

Jennifer gave Mandrake a quick, intense glance. She tried to read his thoughts from his facial reaction to Alec's question, but she had no success. The magician was inscrutible. Did he suspect her father of being a part

of this terrorism? Did he think her father spent his time stealing files on intelligence activities from playboy-zillionaires? Her father was a scientist. A great one. A good man. Before she knew what was happening, Jennifer Lindsay had burst into tears and run to the rear of the plane. There she sat huddled in a seat, face against the window.

Mandrake signed off with Alec. He turned to Lothar. "Take over, will you?" Lothar nodded and assumed control of the plane. Mandrake unfastened his safety belt and started toward Jennifer.

"I'm all right, really," she said, waving him away.

"No you're not. You've been under a lot of strain. It's understandable. I'm glad to see you letting it out."

That was all she needed to hear. A fresh burst of sobs came welling up from her throat. She put her hand to her mouth to block them, but it was no use. Mandrake touched her hair, smoothing it gently. She leaned against him and struggled to gain control of herself.

"It just seems that we keep meeting dead ends. Blind alleys. Blanks. None of this is helping to find my father. We aren't any closer to finding him than we were when I arrived at Lake Tahoe."

"It always seems that way at this point in an investigation," Mandrake tried to reassure her—and himself. "But we're getting closer, even when we don't know it. The pieces are coming in one by one. Then we can fit them all together."

"I know that, I guess." She was about to cry again. "I don't know why I'm behaving this way."

"I told you, I understand why." Mandrake squeezed her arm gently.

"I guess you're right. This has been coming for days. You can't imagine what it's like to think that someone you love is dead and gone forever. And then to suddenly be given hope—more than hope—*certainty* that he's alive. And then, just as suddenly, within hours of the

elation, to have it all dashed. It's more than a person ought to have to bear, Mandrake."

"It is."

"And I heard Alec Gordon's question. I know what he meant, too. He suspects my father as much as those other men, doesn't he?" She looked at Mandrake hard, straight into the steel gray eyes. He couldn't lie to her. Not when she looked at him this way.

"We can't rule out anyone or anything yet. We just don't have enough information."

She took a deep breath. "I understand. And you don't know Dad. Not the way I do, certainly. You don't know that there's no way he could be anything but innocent . . . *if he's alive*!"

She started to cry again, softly this time. Mandrake pulled her to him very gently. He was careful to keep his physical signals reading right. They meant "I'll take care of you. You're safe." Nothing more. Not yet.

Jennifer understood the vibrations she felt from the dark-haired magician. She knew he was attracted to her. And he probably knew, better than she wished he did, how attracted she was to him. But now, at this moment, he was offering her platonic reassurance. That was what she needed. And that was what he gave. He was okay in her book, this Mandrake the Magician. She looked up at him and gave him a half smile. He returned it. They were close and she had stopped crying.

Sergeant Frank Ho was waiting in the airfield as they deplaned in Honolulu. He wore plain dark slacks and a bright print shirt. His round Polynesian face was reassuring and kind. If cops across the USA all looked like Sergeant Ho, Jennifer thought to herself, every police department in America could fire its public relations person. Cops would be the most popular group of professionals since bartenders.

Sergeant Ho led Mandrake, Jennifer, and Lothar to

an unmarked car. Inside, he began to explain the investigation's progress to date. Security personnel and witnesses aboard the *Seaview* had confirmed seeing a young seaman aboard the ship in the area where the blasts were detonated. The remains of a body had been found in this same area. The body had been identified as the seaman witnesses had mentioned. Walter Kevan.

"We're just about positive that Kevan triggered the thing," Sergeant Ho explained.

"But for what reason?" Lothar asked. "Seems we're coming up short in the motive department these days."

"It's hard, isn't it?" Ho continued. "Why would he want to blow away half of his own ship? His service record was really very respectable. Impressive, even. He was in the Navy. Exemplary sailor. And according to everyone on the *Seaview,* his personality was somewhere between Pat Boone and "Little House on the Praire." Clean-cut, All-American type. Didn't drink much. No dope, which is more than you can say for a lot of the kids on these private vessels. In fact, Kevan was a regular churchgoer. So *you* figure a motive."

"Have you done a background check?" Mandrake asked.

"Nothing the least bit suspicious turned up in his associations or his past," Ho replied. "Of course, we haven't had time to do a full investigation yet. But strictly off the top, it doesn't look promising."

"But even if he was the guy who planted the explosive," Lothar reasoned aloud, "why would he sit around waiting for it to go off, making it into a suicide mission?"

"I wouldn't mind an answer to that one myself," Mandrake chimed in. "So where do we go from here, Sergeant? What's *your* next move?"

"I haven't really got one. Just before returning to the ship last night, Kevan was out with a bunch of his buddies. They'd met some girls in one of those tourist bars

and were partying a little. Seems Kevan left the group sort of suddenly. We've rounded up all of the kids who were with him and returned them to the scene of their little get-together. *Marie's Tahiti.* Are you ready?" Ho laughed at the bar's foolish name.

"The witnesses are there now?" Mandrake asked.

"That's right," Ho replied.

"Well, let's have a look, then."

When they arrived at *Marie's*, the sailors and the college girls were already assembled. They were being interviewed individually by members of the Honolulu PD. Mandrake immediately noticed a girl sitting off by herself. It was apparent that the whole incident had affected her more deeply than the others; Mandrake could sense the intensity of her emotional state at once. When he asked Sergeant Ho who the young lady was, he was given the name Cindy Willis. She had been Walter's date, of sorts, the night before. She was the last person Walter had spoken to before he left the bar.

"I'd like to talk to her alone, Sergeant, if that can be arranged."

"Of course. There's a room in back, through the storage room. They use it for a sort of office. It's where the telephone is. Why don't you go in there? I'll send her in."

As Mandrake nodded and went into the back of the bar, Sergeant Ho went to get Cindy.

"Would you follow me, please, miss? We'd like you to explain what happened for one other person. A special investigator. You don't mind, do you?"

Cindy looked up at him. "Of course not. But I've told you everything that I remember. We weren't together very long."

"Just follow me." Sergeant Ho led Cindy to the back of the bar.

Meanwhile, Lothar had joined a local investigator who was taking a statement from one of Walter's ship-

mates. Only Jennifer was left with nothing to do. She weighed her situation for a moment and made a decision. As unobtrusively as possible, she eased her way into the back storage room, where the door to the office Mandrake and Cindy were using was slightly ajar. An inexperienced eavesdropper, Jennifer did quite well her first time out. She positioned herself carefully so that she had a full view of the proceedings in the office, and she could hear almost everything.

Mandrake asked Cindy to have a seat. She did.

"I know you're very upset, Miss Willis. We won't be here very long. I'll just need your cooperation for a little while." His tone was gentle.

"It's fine. I just keep thinking I'm responsible somehow. I keep wondering if anything I did or said set him off, pushed a button or something that made him do it." She was trembling slightly.

Mandrake sat across from her. "I doubt that, Miss Willis. There wasn't an argument between you, was there?"

"No, nothing like that at all. We were flirting with each other. We were making jokes about him being a sailor and everything. I don't know. It wasn't very heavy. We'd only been talking for, maybe, twenty minutes when the waitress came over to say he had a call in the next room. In here. And when he came back from the phone call he had that weird look on his face. I called after him, but he didn't even turn back. He just walked straight past me. I was pretty hurt by it. I mean, I thought he was just standing me up. I left right after he did."

Mandrake stood up. "Cindy, I'd like to use a form of hypnosis on you, with your permission. It will help you to recall last night . . . not *better*, actually, but differently. Would you mind being a subject for hypnosis?" Subconsciously, he touched the gold amulet around his neck.

"No," Cindy told him. "I wouldn't mind."

"Good." Mandrake told her to relax as he took the amulet from around his neck and with the slightest flick of his wrist, set the golden disk spinning on its chain. He held the magically turning piece of gold before Cindy's eyes.

From the storeroom, Jennifer watched in fascination. She herself was an amateur hypnotist, a skill she had acquired as part of her studies in parapsychology. But she was anxious to see the variety practiced by Mandrake. His technique, at first, did not seem very unusual. He told Cindy that her eyes were growing heavy, that her hands were like lead weights. Gently and carefully, he coaxed her into a trance and then edged her deeper and deeper asleep.

The magician stood over the young girl, his amulet still spinning, even though Cindy's eyes were closed now and she was in a very deep hypnotic trance. His voice took on an even more soothing, placating quality than usual; his eyes seemed to go clear as glass.

Jennifer, for the first time, was aware of the power this man possessed. It was awesome. His presence was overwhelming. It filled the room as the gold amulet spun and he coaxed his subject even more deeply asleep. It was difficult for Jennifer, suddenly, to realize that this was the same man she had chatted with the past few days and drove beside on mundane trips to and from airports. Here, in the back of a Honolulu bar, she recognized his *true* identity. He was more than a show-magician turned detective. He was the keeper of a mighty secret, the master of untold powers.

"Now Cindy," Mandrake spoke softly, "when I count to three, I want you to begin replaying something in your mind. I want you to picture exactly what happened with Walter Kevan prior to and just following the phone call last night. I want you to remember everything—clear as if it were happening again. Precise as an instant

replay on television. I want you to recall what happened, what you *saw*, what it looked like when Walter Kevan left the room . . . and when he returned. Do you understand, Cindy?"

Cindy nodded. "Like an instant replay."

Mandrake smiled. "Exactly. When I count three, I want the memory to begin. Do you understand?"

She nodded again. He smiled again.

"Now, Cindy. One . . . two . . . three . . . Walter Kevan is now as clear in your mind as Channel Four. Can you see Walter?"

"I see him. He's got freckles. We've just met and he asks if I'd like to try a "Marie's Special." It's one of those big Polynesian specialty drinks. They put a rose in it. Walter makes me laugh. He's a lot of fun. I like him."

Jennifer, in the next room, was transfixed. She had never seen a trance quite this effective. She listened as Cindy recounted the entire conversation between herself and Walter.

"Then the phone call," Mandrake said, urging Cindy along toward the part of her evening that interested him most.

"Yes," said Cindy. "Long distance. He says nobody could be calling him here because no one knows he's in Honolulu. He'll be right back. It's probably a wrong number. . ."

Mandrake placed his right hand on her forehead. Suddenly, he seemed less like a magician than like a patient, gentle doctor. He kept the hand on her head, just above the eyebrows and continued to hold the amulet with his other hand. He closed his own eyes for a moment. "Now, Cindy, Walter is coming back."

"Yes," she said. "He's coming back with that strange look in his eyes."

Mandrake opened his eyes, keeping one hand on Cindy's forehead and the other on the amulet. He mumbled a sentence very softly, to himself. Jennifer just

barely heard the words, but she did not know what they meant.

"*By the eternal powers of Theron the Master.*"

Jennifer did not believe what she saw next. Never, in all of her parapsychological studies had she seen or even read about anything quite like it.

Cindy Willis, still seated in her chair, began to glow. Physically. A gold light began to emanate from her. Her entire body seemed to grow translucent, as if her skin were becoming a pale silk cloth, stretched in front of a candle flame. She glowed, light radiating from her forehead, her cheeks, her neck, her entire being. She gave off an aura now, like sunlight at dusk—a warm, candlelight color. The room was noticeably brighter. Cindy Willis was lighting it. From her closed eyes, a special radiance poured; a highly concentrated beam of light radiated from each pupil. These amber beams of light, like two flashlights, were tangible, visible in the air. They converged at the white wall in front of Cindy, where they splashed light over the entire surface.

Jennifer was dumbstruck with awe. And when she saw what happened next, she could hardly breathe. The light on the wall began to shed colors, exactly as if someone were projecting an out-of-focus film. Mandrake's hand pressed a little harder on Cindy's forehead and the colors began to swirl and focus, to bleed in some places and to separate in others until a picture formed. Cindy Willis's eyes were projecting a picture on the wall of the room. In her trance, through Mandrake's ministrations, Cindy had become a living projector. And the picture she projected on the wall was Walter Kevan, the precise memory image of him she held in her mind, made visible to anyone in the room.

This was like no thought-reading Jennifer had ever encountered. This was incredible. And beautiful. Mandrake took in every detail of the projected image of Walter with tremendous concentration. The image of

the young man, seen through Cindy's eyes, immediately made one specific impression. The sailor was in a trance of some kind. His attention was focused on some unseen place. And the look in his eyes was familiar to Mandrake. It was the look he had seen in the eyes of the men who had come after him and Lothar on the highway two days ago. There was no mistaking it. Walter Kevan was in the same state as those men had been. The slack jaw. The robotlike demeanor. The similarity was undeniable, the deduction inevitable.

The image of Walter Kevan was now walking out into the street. Mandrake took his hand from Cindy's forehead, and the image began to fade in stages, just as it had appeared. Now there was a pool of swirling color on the wall, then just a faint gold light, projected from Cindy's eyes. Soon, the aura around the girl began to fade.

Mandrake reached for a light switch and the room was suddenly normal again; Cindy Willie was just a college girl again—nice skin, but nothing special. Mandrake gently started to talk Cindy out of her trance. Jennifer Lindsay left the storeroom and went into the front of the bar. Once there, she ordered a Mai Tai.

When Cindy emerged from the back office, she was calm. She would never know what had happened while she was in her trance. All she knew was that she felt better, and she dimly understood that Mandrake was the cause. Living through the experience again seemed to have purged some of the uneasiness she felt. As she left with the rest of the girls and sailors, she thanked Mandrake for being so patient with her.

Mandrake saw Jennifer and her Mai Tai at the bar. "I think maybe I'll have a club soda myself."

"Join me," Jennifer said. But she could not make conversation. They drank in silence.

Suddenly, Lothar burst in from the street.

"Telex from Alec Gordon just came for us, Mandrake. It's happened again." The black man was clearly agitated.

"What happened again?" Mandrake rose.

"Within the past two hours. A pair of incredibly well-executed explosions. One in a chemical plant near Houston."

"Owned by Arkadian Enterprises, of course." Mandrake took a sip of his soda.

"Of course. And one at the sight of a nuclear reactor that's under construction in Illinois."

"A reactor." Mandrake's face darkened. Things were getting worse.

"Thank God it hadn't been stocked with nuclear fuel yet, otherwise half the state of Illinois would be sitting in Canada right this minute."

"Any details on these two? Who? How?"

Lothar looked at him intently. "Yeah, a little. And they're both cut from the same mold as the *Seaview* disaster. A single male body found at the scene, strongly suspected to be that of the saboteur. Plastic explosives used in both cases."

Mandrake turned to Jennifer. "We'll be heading back to San Francisco within an hour. If there's anything you want to do in Honolulu, I suggest you take care of it now."

Jennifer breathed hard. "Well, I think I'd like to buy some aspirin." She glanced from Mandrake to Lothar and back to the magician. "Looks as if you two want to talk. I'll ask Sergeant Ho where I can find a drugstore in this tropical paradise. Meet you at the car."

"Thanks," said Mandrake. Jennifer gave him a smile and left the bar.

Lothar was a little confused. "Something you don't want Jennifer to hear?"

"Not yet. It's just that I think I see a connection between her father's experiments and what's going on. She

told us that he was working with the use of hallucinogens to alter perception. Mind-bending drugs. Well I had a look at Walter Kevan just now. . ."

Lothar looked up at him in surprise.

"Telepathic projection. I performed it on Kevan's girlfriend and got a look at his face after the phone call that apparently set him off. It was the face of a man under hypnosis if ever I've seen one. And it was a perfect match for the faces on those two robots who tried to ice use."

"They've got names now, by the way," Lothar informed him. Glenn Cutter and Dallas Smith. Both unemployed. Both San Francisco residents. Both honorable Navy discharges. The computer just coughed up their identities from Naval records. No police records on either of them."

"Well, that's a start. Before we tear out of Hawaii, ask Sergeant Ho to run up a phone trace on that long distance call Kevan took here last night. It might give us a direction if we knew where it came from."

"Roger," Lothar said with a mock salute. "But tell me more about your hypnosis theory."

"There's not much to tell yet," the magician said as he slapped down money for his soda. "But you control a man's mind and you control everything. Walter Kevan had the look of a programmed robot. So did—what did you say their names were?"

"Cutter and Dallas."

"Have they got identities yet on the men found at the new explosion sites?"

"Nope. Alec is sending agents out to find out who. . ."

"Well, it's my guess they won't get very far," Mandrake said as they rose and started for the car. "See, I don't think these guys *have* motives. I don't think they're anything more than soldiers, possibly even chosen for their anonymity. Which explains why they can be al-

lowed—even programmed—to die on the job."

"There's a madman out there calling the shots, isn't there, Mandrake?"

"Worse than that, Lothar. It's beginning to look like we're going to have to start second-guessing an army of robots. Mind-controlled robots. Are you ready?"

"I'm not sure."

They got into the car where Jennifer was waiting and started for the airport.

VII

Jennifer exhaled a sigh of relief as she entered her San Francisco apartment. She tossed her keys on a table and called to Mandrake as she kicked her shoes through the bedroom door.

"Just come on in and make yourself comfortable."

"Thanks," he called back, looking around. She had good taste. The furniture was modern but not flashy; the colors were muted earth tones and she had chosen several pieces with a decidedly Navajo look. "I like the place," he called to her.

"Thanks," she called from the bedroom. "I have a special love of Indian things. The paintings are by a very well-known Cree artist. Well-known to people who know about native American painters, that is. Most people don't know there *are* any native American painters . . . or writers . . . or anything else, for that matter. It's a hobby of mine. You see, I *do* have interests besides psychic phenomena and bumping my head."

"I see." Mandrake settled into a chair, warning himself not to get too comfortable. He didn't have time. The early morning meeting with Arkadian was less than three hours away, and it would take him close to two and a half hours in the air to get there. It was a good thing he enjoyed using that Learjet, the magician thought to himself. He started trying to log the hours he'd spent flying in the past few days—starting with the trips to and from Hawaii—but he hadn't gotten very far when Jennifer entered in a robe.

"I hope you don't mind my wearing this thing around the house. But after that flight, nothing else looked remotely comfortable. Now, breakfast. Eggs Florentine? Eggs Benedict? Eggs en Casserole?"

Mandrake looked up.

"Yes, she's a gourmet cook, too," Jennifer laughed. "There are a lot of things you don't know about the Lindsay girl, Mr. Magician."

"I hope I'll get a chance to learn a few."

"No doubt. We'll start with breakfast. I've had rave reviews for the Florentine, but there are those who prefer . . ."

Mandrake held up his hand to silence her. "I wish I had time, but my meeting with Arkadian is scheduled for nine. I'm going to be cutting it close as it is. I'd just like to rest for a few minutes before I head back to the airport."

"Okay, so I'll skip the sauce and we'll just have a couple of eggs over easy. With bacon and broiled tomatoes."

"Really, Jennifer. No food."

"Yes, food. We've got to fatten you up." She laughed at her own joke and eased herself onto the arm of a chair. "Tell you what, I'll throw some stuff in the blender and make you a breakfast shake you wouldn't believe. You can drink it on the way to the airport."

Mandrake smiled. "You're really bound and determined to take care of me, aren't you?"

"You have no idea," she countered, rising and heading toward the kitchen. "Follow me."

In the kitchen, she began squeezing juice from several fresh oranges. "I've got to calm myself down," she told him. "Everything seems to be moving so fast. It's like jet lag plus a complete sense of uneasiness and anticipation. About my father." She paused. "About you."

"Me?" asked the magician.

"Yes. You've got me a bit on edge, you know." She

put the last piece of orange into the juicer. "Someday when there's time I would really like to get to know you better."

"Same here," Mandrake responded quietly.

She smiled, pouring the fresh juice into a blender on the countertop. "I bet I know what you're wondering."

"You read minds?"

"You do." She started to peel a couple of bananas. "And yeah, I guess I do too. I bet you're wondering whether I want to get to know you in a professional—i.e. laboratory—sense, or in another sense."

"Biblical," he said helpfully.

"Biblical," she smiled, pressing the button on the blender, and adding the peeled bananas.

They were silent for a moment as the kitchen machine made its obnoxious noise. When Jennifer turned it off, Mandrake spoke.

"Which sense *do* you want to get to know me in?"

"Both," she said simply, moving to the refrigerator for eggs and a jar of coconut milk.

"Professionally, you may already know more about me than I want you to."

Jennifer smiled as she poured the coconut milk into the blender and cracked two eggs to go in after. "You knew I was spying on you when you questioned the girl in the bar, didn't you?"

She didn't wait for an answer. She pressed the "blend" button and watched her mixture get frothy. After a few seconds, she turned the button off. "What do you call what you did?"

"Telepathic projection." He took a seat at her kitchen table.

"It was incredible. Light just poured out of her. As if she were, I don't know, a human projection unit or something."

"That's more or less what she was." Jennifer turned and stared at him. Mandrake continued his explanation:

"Energy from the brain transforms itself to thoughts, which are very much like sound waves. Now the waves get converted into electrical impulses and these, finally, are converted to pictures. I'm merely the conduit."

Jennifer waited a moment before she responded. His explanation was so simple, so off-hand, so matter-of-fact, as if people did such things every day. Maybe he *did.* She couldn't brush off the faintest tinge of scepticism. "Did I really see what I thought I saw?" she asked at last. "It's important to me."

"You'll have to answer that for yourself. You wouldn't expect a magician to reveal his secrets, would you?"

"Just tell me this much," Jennifer continued, refusing to be put off so easily. "Is there a difference between the magic you do onstage and the magic you perform in real life? Like the projection thing?"

"Some is illusion; some is true magic."

"True magic." Suddenly she believed him. His gray eyes couldn't be capable of lying. And she could sense now, as she had while she watched the telepathic projection, that she was in the presence of someone *very* special. Someone with a gift she could only begin to understand or appreciate. She poured some wheat germ into the breakfast shake mixture and handed it to Mandrake in silence. She sat down beside him at the table. "True magic. Like a superpower?" she asked.

"If you'd like to call it that," he answered, holding his gaze into her eyes.

"Do you use mass hypnosis to make audiences believe they're seeing things they aren't?"

Mandrake didn't answer. Instead, he leaned toward Jennifer and kissed her on the lips. She held back questioningly for a moment and then admitted to herself how much she wanted him. She pressed forward eagerly.

When their lips parted, he smiled at her and joked

softly, "It was the only way I could think of to shut you up."

"Don't stop," she said, running her hands along his arms.

They held each other for a long, warm minute before either of them spoke again.

"You don't have much time, remember?" Jennifer whispered.

"No, I don't," he whispered back. "But I will."

"Drink your shake." Jennifer rose and went to the counter where she poured herself a glass of the orange mixture. She toasted him, "Your health," and took a long sip. "Where are you meeting Mr. Arkadian this time? Not another beauty pageant, I hope."

"You're not going to believe this, but I'm meeting him at Wonderworld."

"The Amusement Park?" She had heard of it. There was a chain of Wonderworlds across America. They had revolutionized the leisure industry with outrageously elaborate and exotic rides.

"He owns *all* of the Wonderworld Parks," Mandrake explained. "And he's at the California Park today because they're inaugurating a new ride. The ultimate roller coaster. It's called the California Scream-In. He's there to cut the ribbon."

"You're putting me on," Jennifer laughed. "His entire world blowing up around him. Four explosions in fewer days. A saboteur trailing his properties all across the country. And *he's* cutting ribbons?

"Arkadian won't let anything slow him down," said Mandrake, finishing the rest of his shake.

"Yeah, well, death would slow him down, wouldn't it?" Jennifer followed suit, draining her glass.

"I don't think we're dealing with someone who just wants to kill Arkadian. It's far more elaborate than that."

Jennifer collected the glasses and put them in the sink. "Did the dossiers on Schultz, Romero, and the others tell you anything?"

"Enough to have Alec Gordon put them all under surveillance." He stood up and straightened his shirt collar. "Say, I've really got to get a move on. Why don't you get some rest, huh?"

"I won't be resting until we know something about my father. One way or another. I've got to know." Mentioning her father, Jennifer's convivial, second-wind mood started to wear off. By the end of her sentence, she had tears in her eyes again.

"I want Narda to come here and stay with you until this whole thing is over." Mandrake held her.

"I don't need a babysitter," she told him, snuggling her head against his chest.

"You need a companion."

"Okay," she sighed. "Just answer one more question before you go, would you?"

"I'll try."

"Do *you* consider my father a suspect? If he's alive?"

Mandrake looked away, something he rarely did. "Arkadian doesn't rule him out as a possible enemy."

"I'm not talking about Arkadian," said Jennifer.

Mandrake looked straight at her. "I can't eliminate anyone, Jenny. Not until all the facts are in and the case is solved. That's just how it works. Those are the rules."

"Then I'll abide by them." She hugged him. "Now go. Call me."

And the magician was out the door.

Not since Disneyworld had an amusement park attracted as much attention as the newest Wonderworld in California. This was in part due to Raymond Arkadian's knack for publicity and promotion, and in part it was due to his penchant for the biggest and the best. Wonderworld had made a quick reputation by of-

fering the biggest of everything. It boasted the world's tallest ferris wheel and the world's largest merry-go-round. Now, with the inauguration of California Scream-In, the park would not only have the world's longest and highest roller coaster, it would have the world's fastest as well. The Scream-In had everything. *And* it was made of wood.

Arkadian had been a roller coaster freak since childhood and, as every afficionado knows, the newfangled all-steel roller coasters are terrific in the height and speed departments, but they lack something in character. The Scream-In was a return to the fabulous roller coasters of the past, the rickety wooden monsters that looked as if the weight of a single car could topple the whole thing over. That was part of the fun. Of course, the Scream-In was far from rickety. Every board was scientifically placed to support *twice* the weight it would normally have withstood. This marvel of engineering made other wooden roller coasters obsolete. Nothing short of an earthquake or a bomb could topple it. Here, at last, was a roller coaster to end all roller coasters.

The Scream-In towered over Wonderworld. The ride was three times as long as any conventional model. The drop from the tallest peak was incredibly steep. Park crowds had watched it being built for close to a year and teenagers across the state had looked forward to its completion with keen anticipation. Today, the big unveiling was to take place. Arkadian would cut the ribbon himself. The first car to travel the sprawling skeleton of the coaster would contain a host of famous guests—two movie stars, a television journalist, and, rumor had it, the governor.

By the time Mandrake arrived at Wonderworld, crowds had already assembled to await the noon unveiling. He stopped at the courtesy booth where he was given VIP admission to the park and pointed toward Arkadian's headquarters for the day, a canopied wharf

in a part of the park called the Blue Lagoon.

Mandrake found Arkadian seated there at a table with a red and white sun umbrella. He sat with a tall glass of tomato juice, surveying boatrides that traversed the clear, blue, almost too-perfect water in the man-made lake.

"Fantasy," Arkadian said as Mandrake approached. "That's what a park like this is all about. Look at that water. No natural stream, lake, ocean, or river in America will ever be that clean, that pure ever again." He sipped the juice. "It all started with the roller coasters. At first I started buying up old amusement parks and converting them into Wonderworlds to preserve the wonderful old wooden coasters. But now I'm *building* them. Had a hell of a fight with the state Safety Commissioner, too. Couldn't convince him my design was actually stronger than metal, which it is. Took close to a year. He held me up, but . . ."

Mandrake interrupted. "Mr. Arkadian, I'm fascinated. But I didn't come to discuss roller coasters."

"No, you didn't. Alec told you what happened?"

"Yes, he told me what you had received this morning. He told me over the radio while I was flying down here from San Francisco."

"Good." Arkadian waved his arm. A man in a park uniform came forward carrying a small cassette recorder. "I know I probably seem very calm to you, Mandrake. That's my business. I learned to stay calm a long time ago, whether the world around me is falling apart or not." Arkadian paused to light a cigarette. "But let me tell you, inside I'm boiling. The indignity of it. The insanity. What can I do? That's the *real* kicker. There's not a damned thing I can do but triple the security around everything I own and go on about my business. I'll just have to depend on you to bail me out before I go bankrupt. You have, I'm sure, some idea

how many millions have been blown away in the last twenty-four hours alone."

"Some idea," said Mandrake. "Yes."

"Good," Arkadian responded, gesturing again to his aide. This time, the uniformed park attendant supplied him with one white glove. "In case there are fingerprints," Arkadian explained, as he donned it and pressed the start button on the machine.

The reels began to turn in the tiny recorder. The voice that came out was muffled, electronically distorted. "Hello, again."

"It's the same voice I heard on the phone," Arkadian explained. "Obviously, it's filtered through something."

The cassette message continued. "I think I must have proved by now that you're utterly vulnerable, Arkadian. Practically naked in the world. We know where *all* of your interests are. *And* we know what to do with them. I guess it's no secret by now that I'm the one who stole the file on your clandestine Agency activities." The voice paused.

"Well, when we talked last, you asked me what I wanted. I'm ready to tell you now. If you're ready to deliver." Another pause.

"Ten million dollars. American. Plain and simple. You deliver within forty-eight hours and the reign of terror ends. You refuse and everything you ever touched will burst into flames before your very eyes. Everything. There won't be an Arkadian Enterprises project left on the face of the earth. That's ten million dollars, Arkadian, and you can go back to being a free man. Refuse and you might as well be dead. Got it?" One more pause.

The voice took on a mocking, sarcastic tone when it returned. "Oh yes, there *is* one more thing, Arkadian. Just in case you think your brand new beefed up security precautions are a hedge against my work, I've planned a

little demonstration for you. Well, actually, it's to be quite a large demonstration. I'm sure you'll enjoy it. Today. That's all for now. *Do* remember what I said, Arkadian. Ten. See ya 'round the campus."

There were a few moments of silence as the reel continued turning. Then the machine shut itself off automatically.

"Forty-eight hours to come up with ten million dollars." Arkadian stared Mandrake down. He took another sip of tomato juice, which Mandrake suddenly realized was probably heavy with vodka. He wouldn't blame him or be surprised.

"Forty eight hours. Can you believe it?" Arkadian gave the cassette recorder back to the park attendant and took a long sip of his juice. "Forty-eight hours to raise ten million dollars. It's absurd. It's got to be a joke."

"I doubt that," said Mandrake.

"Well, he's going to find out that the joke's on *him,* or on all of us, I'm afraid." Arkadian rose and lit a cigarette. "I'd been trying to quit," he said, looking at the cigarette with contempt. "Three months without a single one. But then all of this happened."

"Take it easy on yourself, Mr. Arkadian." Mandrake was finding, to his own surprise, that he actually liked Raymond Arkadian. True, Arkadian's arrogance and quick mood changes were offputting signs of his tremendous drive. But there was a candid side to the man as well, an honesty which made Mandrake feel that perhaps he *deserved* all he had acquired. For all of his playboy pretentions, Raymond Arkadian wore his heart on his sleeve.

"Let's walk a little, shall we?" Arkadian asked, moving to the wharf's entryway. Mandrake followed him and Arkadian began leading the magician on a brief tour of this portion of the park. As they strolled, Arkadian confronted Mandrake with his problem.

"I haven't got it." He took a deep drag on the cigarette.

"What?" Mandrake regarded the man beside him.

"Ten million dollars. I couldn't pay it if I wanted to."

"I'm not saying you ought to cave in to terrorists, Arkadian," Mandrake said, kicking a rare beer can that marred the otherwise immaculate walkway, "but don't try to cry poverty. I mean, the Miss International Pageant alone must have cost well over that. And how many of these Wonderworlds are there? Ten?"

"You're a magician. You're supposed to know about truth and illusion." Arkadian smiled sadly. "My mother doesn't even know this, but even though the press considers me a billionaire, I'd have difficulty raising *one* million dollars in forty-eight hours. This "empire" they credit me with is built on very clever bookkeeping and paper—one mortgage paying for the next. A regular house of cards, as they say. There's a lot on the surface, I'm aware. I don't live badly, either. But try liquidating my holdings to raise cash. *That* trick would take an even greater magician than you, I'm afraid."

He crushed his cigarette butt in one of the park's built-in receptacles.

"Well then, I guess that's that," said Mandrake. "It gives us forty-eight hours to find this maniac and stop him."

"That's what it gives us. Yes." Arkadian steered them down another path, past some of the park's most adventurous rides. There were structures that looked as tall as skyscrapers which, for fifty cents a ride, would bend and twist and whip you through the air until your breath was gone and your mind with it. There were circular contraptions to whisk you around in high-speed vehicles, each equipped with its own stereo system. There were chutes and slides and glider planes on micro-thin plastic strings. There were laugh-in-the-darks and fly-through-the-airs in the most remarkable profusion Mandrake

had ever seen. And each gaudy contraption, looking like it had cost some mad scientist half the gross national product to create it, each spectacular contraption only served to drive home one basic fact: Arkadian couldn't raise the money. Time was at a premium now. The cassette had promised a new disaster today. Somewhere, a zombie-like man was planting an explosive. Just like the others.

"Your secretary, John French, the man who was found under the stage at the Pageant . . ."

"What about him?" asked Arkadian, surprised the conversation had turned back in time.

"Did he serve in the Navy?"

"Yes. I think he did. Anyway, I can remember one of the other staffers teasing him about a tattoo. A heart with USNC inscribed in it. I believe he was in the Navy several years ago. Why?"

Mandrake kept walking. "There's a computer in Washington checking this theory out right now, but I've got a feeling all of the saboteurs have Navy backgrounds, may even have served in the same unit, known each other in some way before getting involved in this mess."

"Saboteurs." Arkadian stopped in his tracks. "You think John French blew up the stage at the pageant? But he had a security clearance."

"Given to him by George Schultz."

Mandrake had made his point. Arkadian grew quiet and thoughtful. "Walter Kevan, the Hawaii saboteur, had a Navy background," Mandrake continued, "so did the two guys in Tahoe. I'll know about French this afternoon. All I want to do now, though, is find the next . . ."

Mandrake suddenly stopped speaking. He didn't know why he had been so thick. A full half hour had passed since he had heard the taped message. Why had it taken him so long to figure out what was about to happen? There, looming before him, stood the California Scream-In.

"The roller coaster!" Mandrake said the words aloud, almost in a trance himself.

"What about it?" asked Arkadian, surprised at the magician's sudden change of mood.

"Where *else* would he strike today?"

Arkadian took a drag on his third cigarette of the morning. "Not here," he said calmly. "He's after Agency-connected projects, isn't he? There are still prime targets listed in the file. An electronics lab, the cancer research center, and one I don't even want to think about: a nuclear power station that's fueled and functioning right this minute. If he decided to pull the trigger on that one, it could mean the worst nightmare in the history of this country. Hiroshima times nine."

"He'll strike the roller coaster, and he'll strike today. He started with the pageant, remember. There was no Agency connection; it was just an attention-getting device. Then came the three Agency-connected explosions, to show you he had you, and now. . ."

"What?" Arkadian urged him to continue.

"Now he's got a big media affair with the press and public watching. That's what he wants. He's drunk with the power of what he's been doing. He's going to strike today. Here."

Mandrake looked straight ahead. The mammoth wooden structure towered over the entire park like an awesome monument. Mandrake imagined what an explosion would do: cars ripped from the tracks and sent hurtling through space, the entire sprawling skeleton bursting into flame, the towering support beams crashing to earth. Whether the Scream-In was the safest wooden roller coaster on earth or not, it would collapse like matchsticks.

Mandrake surveyed every inch of the monolithic ride from his vantage point on the ground, until his eye caught something up near the very crest. It was only a tiny black speck from where they stood, but Mandrake could tell it was a man. A man, standing fifty feet off the

ground, at the crest of the roller coaster.

"Who is that?" asked Mandrake, pointing to the figure.

"I have no idea," Arkadian answered. "Probably maintenance doing a last-minute check."

"When does the first ride start?" Mandrake asked quickly.

"In about half an hour. In fact, I've got to get back to my people. The governor should be here any. . ."

Midsentence, Arkadian realized he was talking to no one. Mandrake had broken away from him and was running toward the California Scream-In.

VIII

"Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party."

The sentence pounded rhythmically in Thom Burns's skull and he worked to the rhythm of the words he heard. Ever since the phone call, they had not left him. He had gone to his locker in the Wonderworld maintenance department, taken out the plastic explosives, timer, and detonator, picked up a roll of friction tape from the supply office and headed for the Scream-In. The wind blew hard, up here at the top of the roller coaster, but Thom Burns didn't feel it. He had work to do.

Burns had stationed himself at the summit, the height of the last big climb. There were safety rails on either side of the five-foot-wide track, and towering overhead was the huge electric sign that spelled "California Scream-In" in gaudy amusement park letters. It was from this point that the cars on the ride would plunge down the steepest incline. This was the point where a rider would have to hold his breath and wait for the worst—or best—terrifying fifty foot drop.

Perilously far from the ground, standing on a narrow wooden platform designed for metal cars, not human legs, Thom Burns's last thought was safety. He had but one task, and he pursued it with great precision. Easing himself down to a kneeling position by the far rail, he withdrew the plastic explosive devices from the pocket of his maintenance staff coveralls. He reached down un-

der the track and felt along its hard edge until he located a place where two massive support beams came together. Ripping a piece of friction tape from the roll, he prepared to place the device.

"Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party." For a split second, Burns caught a glimpse of the park below. The human figures were so incredibly tiny from here, his head felt suddenly light. And kneeling like this, one hand grasping the rail for support, the other working dextrously under the track with tape and explosives, he experienced a faint but tingling sense of vertigo. The earth spun a little, far below him. But then the words came again, "Now is the time," and the vertigo disappeared in a surge of purpose and resolve. The words were ruling him, guiding him, holding him up.

Burns had taped the explosives in place. Now he connected the detonator, the wires, and the timer, which he set for five minutes. He worked carefully to see that everything was perfectly concealed under the track. Thom Burns was a perfectionist.

His work done, the timer clicking away, Burns felt no desire to leave the roller coaster. All he wanted to do was sit up here at the top and wait for the noise, the colors, the lights that were only minutes away. And in the meantime, he would enjoy the air . . . if he did not look down.

"Now is the time for all good men. . ." He almost sang along with the rhythm of the words as they repeated and repeated. Burns was feeling fine . . . until he saw the intruder.

A dark-haired man was climbing up the track toward him. It didn't compute. No man was supposed to intrude on the work at hand. It hadn't been allowed for. Burns decided to move in the other direction. He started to climb back down the coaster by the same route he had taken to get up. "Now is the time. . ." The words pounded in his temples like blood. What if the man

ruined it? Burns looked back to see if the dark-haired man was nearby. As he turned his head, he caught a glimpse of earth again. It swung beneath him like a pendulum. The insect-like people and the globe they stood on shifted in one great sweep to the right, and then back again to the left. It made him dizzy. He took a step backward to try to steady himself but lost the track beneath his right foot and slipped, grabbing for the wooden rail as he did. He clung to it, his heart throbbing in his chest, his breath gone. He craned his neck around. The man was coming closer.

"Now is the time." Burns pulled himself to his feet and stood, breathing hard, on the track. He would have to face the dark-haired man. He would have to kill him.

"Are you all right?" Mandrake called. He had seen Burns come close to a fall. Even from this distance, eighteen yards away, he could spot the signs he had seen before. The slack-jawed automation quality. The stare. No set of rules has yet been devised for communication with human robots. Mandrake decided to deal with Burns as if he were in full possession of his faculties. "Do you have security clearance to work in this area?" Burns didn't speak. Mandrake decided to try a fresh approach.

"I want to be honest with you," he shouted across the stretch of track. The wind seemed to swallow every sound as it came from his lips. Mandrake held onto the rail with one hand, tried to avoid looking down, and yelled louder. "I know you're here on a mission and I know you want to finish it. But listen to me. It's going to kill you."

Burns just stared at Mandrake. The magician swallowed and continued to shout. "You die when the bomb goes off. I know you're not responsible for what's going on. I know you're innocent. You shouldn't have to *die* for them! They programmed you to explode yourself with the bomb you've planted. They've programmed

you for the whole thing. It isn't *you.* You don't want to blow up the roller coaster! You want to live! Tell me where the plastic is!"

Burns hated the dark-haired man. He had just wanted to sit up here and wait for the colors. Now the stranger made noise and talked crazy. He wanted to wreck it. Burns was angry.

"Please," shouted Mandrake, "tell me where it is before it's too late." He took a step toward Burns, who instinctively shied away two steps. "Please," Mandrake said again, this time mostly to himself. He let his head fall for a moment and took a swallow. The wind and the altitude would get to him soon if he allowed them to. He took two deep breaths, collected himself, and looked up. Burns had a gun pointed at him, aimed precisely between the eyes.

"You're not going to make this easy for me, are you fella?" Mandrake said aloud, not bothering to shout anymore. He knew he would not—and had not been—heard.

The magician was staring across a perilously narrow stretch of wooden track, fifty feet above the earth, looking straight at the barrel of a pistol. He saw Burns cock it. Mandrake's hand involuntarily flew to the amulet around his neck.

"*By the eternal powers of Theron the Master.*"

Burns was about to fire when he saw it. At first he was in awe at its sheer majesty. He had never encountered anything remotely like it before. Overhead, in the air above Wonderworld, not twenty feet from Burns's head, flew an eagle as large as a man.

Burns stared in wild amazement and confusion. Where had it come from, this majestic creature, circling overhead with a proprietary air and a wingspan that had to be at least fifteen feet? The size alone had Burns dumbstruck. But just as suddenly as the creature had appeared, Thom Burns's amazement turned to stark, grabbing terror.

With a horrible, shrieking cry, the bird made a dive in Burns's direction. He ducked and was almost blown to earth by the wind the monster created as it swooped past. When the flapping of wings had subsided, Burns deemed it safe to look up.

The monster was now perched on the "Wonderworld" sign, its mammoth, deadly claws grasping the wooden frame. For the first time, Burns was aware of the enormity of the beak. And still more terrifying were the bird's red, fierce, furious eyes. Human eyes, blazing with anger, vengeance, and bloodlust. They were the most horrifying eyes Burns had ever seen. He raised his pistol and tried to stand. He had to kill the bird.

The eagle raised its head and uttered a shrill, ear-splitting shriek, a cry that was almost human in its fury. And before Burns knew what was happening, the creature was diving for him again. He instinctively covered his eyes and dropped down, the pistol tumbling from his hands as he hit the track.

The gun rolled, but did not fall to earth. It landed, wedged between the track and the rail, a few yards from its owner.

Several yards away, the magician waved his hand.

Burns lay face down on the track, whimpering with terror. He listened for the bird, fearing that it would come again and take his eyes away with it, this time. But all he heard was wind and the muted milling of a crowd far below. He summoned the nerve to look up. The eagle was gone.

"Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party." The words returned, commanding Burns to get back to the business at hand. The dark-haired man was still here. The bird was gone. And Burns had dropped his gun. He looked around and saw where it was wedged. He started toward it.

"Leave the gun alone," called Mandrake.

Burns was oblivious. The chant-like sentence was pounding between his temples. He had to get to the

weapon. He had to kill the intruder. Burns crawled along the track until the gun was within reach. He extended his hand.

The man had uttered something Burns did not understand. "*By the eternal powers of Theron the Master*!" And then Burns felt the heat on his fingertips. The gun was enclosed within a circle of fire! The wind sent sparks sputtering in all directions but did not extinguish the protective flames. They continued to crackle, circling the gun. When Burns reached out for his weapon, the flames leaped up and licked at his hand. He felt pain and backed away.

Mandrake lunged forward, directly into the circle of fire and knocked the gun over the side of the roller coaster. I moment later, the flames disappeared. As the magician started to rise from his disarmament mission, Burns sprang, knocking Mandrake back with the full force of his hundred and eighty pounds.

The battle that ensued on the precarious platform, fifty feet above Wonderworld, found the two participants oblivious to the height at which they fought. The lethal sentence raged through Burns's entire being now, urging him to murder the stranger, to kill him with bare hands if need be. When Mandrake struggled to his feet and broke away from Burns's mighty clutch, the saboteur almost immediately returned with a massive blow to the magician's jaw.

Mandrake found himself thrown back against the rail by the force of the blow. One more pound of force and he would have flipped over the rail backward. Mandrake breathed hard, saw another punch coming from Burns, ducked it, and countered with a powerhouse blow of his own. This time it was Burns's turn to fall against the opposite rail, stunned. A stream of blood trickled down the side of his face. He wiped the red stuff with the back of his hand, threw caution to the winds and flew at the magician with a scream of animal rage.

Mandrake crumpled to the ground beneath the heavier man, but his greater dexterity allowed him to disengage himself from Burns's stranglehold within moments. Seizing the opportunity as soon as he found himself on top, the magician hauled off and delivered a shattering knockout punch. It landed right on target with an awesome thud and Burns was out cold, blood streaming from his mouth.

The wind stung Mandrake's face and whipped his hair as he crawled over the unconscious Burns and made his way to the edge of the track. There he knelt by the rail and reached over the edge, trying to locate the explosives. There was no quicker way to do it, even though each wasted second could cost not only his life, but the lives of hundreds who stood below. He inched along the track like a blind man, feeling beneath the edge for the deadly device. He was still winded from the battle. He clenched his teeth. At any second he might be blown to kingdom—

His hand touched something sticky. Tape. And inches away were the plastic tubes themselves. Quickly, he disengaged the works and pulled them up to the topside of the track. The detonator and timer were still in place. There was no time to disengage them carefully. The magician glanced at the timer and saw that in fact there was no time to do anything—anything but—

He tossed the bomb high into the air over the side of the roller coaster. And not a moment too soon.

There, in the sky, eighty feet above Wonderworld, the device gave forth an eardrum-shattering thunderclap of noise and burst into sparks like the Fourth of July. Below, the crowd uttered an "Aaaahhhhh," as if the whole display had been arranged for their benefit.

Had he been in any condition, Mandrake would have smiled.

Arkadian, park security, and the local police were

waiting at the foot of the roller coaster as Mandrake descended with the groggy, bleary-eyed Burns held in a hammerlock. As the magician got closer to the ground, he saw another familiar face in the crowd. Lothar, who had been assigned to meet him at the park at noon, had obviously arrived early and witnessed the episode at the top of the roller coaster.

At the foot of the ride, Mandrake delivered Burns to the custody of the police. He did, however, want to have access to the automated saboteur for a while longer. Flashing his Agency ID at the impressed local cops, he asked that Burns be taken to an office in the park, to be held there until he, Mandrake, could come to personally handle the questioning. After that, Mandrake informed them, he would take the prisoner into his own custody on behalf of the Agency, until further notice. The cops agreed and hauled the still-dazed Burns to a small office behind the entrance gate.

Without a moment's hesitation, Lothar moved to Mandrake's side. "We've had a little bit of a break. You remember Alec was going to put all of the suspects under surveillance. Well, he had teams stationed outside of all their homes. And Narda and I were going one by one, from suspect to suspect, to do preliminary questioning. . .

"Right," said Mandrake. "I follow you."

"Well, it turns out *two* of your suspect-types have disappeared, flown the coop. Alec had surveillance teams stationed outside of *empty* houses." Lothar grinned. Narda and I were the ones who figured it out. The Agency fellas were just sitting there staring at real estate, monitoring empty bungalows! So that casts pretty strong suspicion on the two men who disappeared, right?"

"Maybe. Which two men have gone up in smoke?"

"George Schultz and William Romero."

"They found a house belonging to Romero? I thought

he'd *already* pulled a disappearing act after he tried to sue Arkadian."

"He's been living under an assumed name for two years."

"It's getting better and better," said Mandrake. "Where's Alec now?"

"On his way from Washington. And by the way, he sent a message for you. You were right about the Navy thing. French and the other guys *did* serve together on the same base. Six years ago."

"And they were all a part of something called Project Long Beach, am I right?"

"As a matter of fact. . ."

"Do you know what Project Long Beach was?"

Lothar had to admit he didn't.

"Naval intelligence, that's what. A program they set up on a volunteer basis. *Had* to be on a volunteer basis, because of what they were dealing with. Hypnosis, suggestion, mind control technique."

"Terrific," Lothar snorted in disgust.

"Looks like the Navy didn't do badly with some of the guinea pigs."

Mandrake and Lothar started walking toward the entrance gate. "Is that why you were so keen on knowing if all the guys had been in the Navy?" Lother asked as they walked.

"That's why," Mandrake answered. "Now, did Narda make it to Jennifer's? I think it's important that somebody be with her at all times."

"Narda should be there now."

"Good," said Mandrake, nodding, as he walked through the office door to have another look at Thom Burns.

Narda had phoned Jennifer immediately upon arriving in San Francisco. On the phone, Jennifer had expressed her feelings that all this care was probably un-

necessary. She was sure of her safety and no matter what Mandrake thought, her emotional state was not so unstable as to require constant companionship. Narda had handled the situation gracefully and well, reassuring Jennifer that this was only a precaution. Jennifer had finally agreed and asked the magician's assistant to pick up a quart of low-fat milk on the way. Narda had said she would.

The doorman had already been notified to expect Narda. He let her in without bothering to call upstairs.

"Fifth floor, apartment A," he told her. "Elevator's on your right.

Narda made her way down the building's mirrored hallway to the large modern elevator.

Once on Jennifer's floor, she had little trouble finding the apartment marked "A." But when she rang the buzzer, no one answered. She tried again. Still no answer. And yet, someone was definitely inside. She could hear the faint rumble of someone moving around, perhaps even moving furniture. Narda rang the buzzer again, hard this time. She allowed a full ten seconds. Still no answer.

She tried the door. It opened.

There was no one in the living room, but faint, rumbling sounds were coming from the bedroom.

Narda almost fainted when a deep male voice called, "Who's out there?" and the bedroom door swung open.

A tall man in his late twenties came out of the bedroom. Narda immediately recognized the far-away, glazed look in his eyes.

"Don't move," he commanded her.

"What are you doing here? What's going on?" Narda shouted.

The man didn't answer. He rushed at her instead, pinning one arm painfully behind her back and clapping his free hand over her mouth.

While the tall man held Narda in his crushing grip,

forcing her to be silent, another man emerged from the bedroom. And with him he dragged a struggling Jennifer Lindsay.

Jennifer had been bound and gagged, but still she strained against the leather straps that restricted her movements. Her eyes caught Narda's and screamed silently for help. Her captor thrust his meaty, tattooed left arm out and roughly pushed her into the center of the room.

Narda bit hard on the wrist of her captor.

He let out a yelp and involuntarily withdrew his hand in pain.

Suddenly free, Narda leaped toward Jennifer and grabbed for the leather straps, as if to start undoing them.

But en route, she was intercepted by the larger of the two men. He grabbed her by both arms and practically picked her up off of the floor.

She raised a knee at him, but he pulled back.

Suddenly, Narda felt a tremendous pressure on the back of her head, as if the ceiling had abruptly collapsed. Everything in her field of vision went red. Then white. And finally black. She crumpled to the floor.

From behind, the tall man in his twenties dropped the bronze urn he had used to bludgeon the magician's assistant.

Jennifer continued to struggle in her leather prison, but she knew it was too late. They had her now and would take her where they pleased, do with her what they wanted.

If only she had insisted that Mandrake take her to the amusement park with him. But no, she had to stay home, where she'd be safe.

The two abductors with zombie-like expressions pushed her rudely into the hall. They muscled her down a deserted back stairway and roughly thrust her into a black Ford with California plates.

As they drove away, Jennifer was aware of throbbing in her appendages where the bonds were tight. Her head was about to split open. But more than anything else, she felt the most intense frustration of her life. Bound and gagged like the heroine in a western. She felt helpless. She felt terrified.

Fifteen minutes later Narda regained consciousness, then raced for the elevator. She checked with the doorman, who had seen nothing. There was no sign of Jennifer or her abductors anywhere. The magician's assistant ran to the nearest public telephone to contact Mandrake.

Thom Burns sat in the darkened amusement park office. He still wore the overalls of a park maintenance employee, but there was an important difference in his appearance at this moment.

He glowed.

His skin was translucent as onionskin and a gold light seemed to emanate from just beneath it. His eyes were closed, and from the lids, two beams of light radiated and converged on the far wall.

But unlike the telepathic projections of Walter Kevan's girlfriend, the image on the wall opposite Thom Burns was completely blurred: a white field on which yellow sparks appeared from time to time, like interference on a television set.

"Preprogrammed," Mandrake explained softly to Lothar. "They've filled his mind with preprogrammed interference. That's probably why Cutter and Dallas wouldn't talk, and it's definitely why I can't do much with this turkey. Did you get his name from the maintenance people here?"

"Thom Burns. They said he came to work at Wonderworld about three weeks ago."

Mandrake turned back to his subject, still clutching

the gold amulet he had used to invoke the trance. "All right, Thom, I want you to concentrate now. I know it's difficult, but I want you to think back about three weeks. Think back to the people who sent you here. Can you see them?"

On the wall, the white blur changed to pink momentarily, causing Lothar to lean forward in anticipation. But nothing more happened, the pink bleached to white and the yellow static returned. The image remained distorted. "Try harder, Thom. Three weeks ago. Do you remember *where* you were? *Do you remember what it looked like?"*

The white surface on the wall remained unchanged.

"Go back to where it all began, Thom. Back to where you were before you came here on your mission. Think back, Thom. Concentrate."

The magician's voice grew gentler. He was coaxing Thom's subconscious with the care of a midwife aiding a difficult birth.

"That's it, Thom. Concentrate. Harder. Where were you? What did it look like? See it, Thom. Smell the air. Look for the colors. Hear the sounds. See it, Thom. Where did they send you from? See the place. Concentrate!"

And as Mandrake spoke, it finally began to happen. Burns began to glow more brightly, as if someone had fanned a flame deep within him. The color of his skin changed from pale gold to a brighter amber. The lights coming from his eyelids grew brighter too; where they converged on the wall, swirls of color appeared and began to move like oil on a pool of water.

Colors shifted, blended, and slowly began to come into focus.

A building. A rustic building, constructed on the order of a Swiss chalet. The image began to fade.

"Concentrate, Thom. Don't stop now!"

The building was gone but the colors were still vivid

and swirling rapidly. They started to focus again and a new picture began to emerge. A landscape. A snowscape. Fir trees lining the edge of a steep, snowy hill. Dark figures moving somewhere in the background.

"Concentrate, Thom."

The black figures came into focus, grew larger. Skiers. The hill was a ski slope. The image began to fade.

"It's a ski resort, isn't it?" asked Lothar in wonder.

"That's what it is, but where? It could be any ski resort from Sugar Bush to Gstaad." Mandrake returned his attention to Burns. "Keep going, Thom. More details. Fasten in on the place. Specific things about it. Keep. . ."

It was too late. Yellow flashes of light were already marring the image, crackling over its surface and obscuring details. Within moments, the colors had begun to bleach out and a dull yellow glow invaded the "screen." Finally, even the dull yellow had given way to white.

"That's all we're going to get," sighed Mandrake. "We're lucky we did as well as we did. They've got him blocked up the way the Russians jam Radio Free Europe. It's absolutely incredible. I'm lucky I got as far as I did."

"So what now? We start a walking tour of the world's ski resorts?"

"No," said Mandrake, gazing intently at Burns.

"What then?"

"I'm going to try something, Lothar. We've got no guarantee it'll work. In fact, odds are it won't. But I don't see where we've got a choice. I'm going to try to reprogram him. To get him to return to the past."

"Back in time?" asked Lothar incredulously. Even for Mandrake, this was quite a promise.

"No," laughed Mandrake. "Back in space. I'm going to try to get him to lead me to the place we saw on the

wall a few minutes ago; the place he *came* from. I'm going to try to get him to lead me there."

"That'll be tricky. They've got his mind in a vise."

"Right, but just suppose it works. Suppose I can get this zombie headed back toward that place—wherever it is. I won't be able to let him out of my sight. That means *you'd* have to handle things back here. Do you mind?"

"Of course not," said Lothar.

"Just be sure Arkadian keeps his communications with them simple. They'll call again with a specific drop-off scheme for the ten million. Tell Arkadian to keep his temper, to explain rationally that he can't deliver, and to leave it at that."

"Check."

"Okay then. I'm going to need total quiet. Would you guard the door to this room for me? No one gets in. Clear?"

"Clear." Lothar left the small office and stationed himself by the entrance.

Mandrake removed his amulet and set it spinning before the dazed, expressionless eyes of Thom Burns.

"Okay, Thom," said Mandrake. "Just take it easy and listen to me. Listen carefully to what I tell you to do. Then we'll take a little trip, you and me. How about that?"

Once in the hall, Lothar was confronted by a very nervous member of the park security team.

"I didn't want to disturb Mandrake, but there's an urgent call. A Miss Narda, from San Francisco."

"Have it transferred in here," said Lothar.

Moments later, Narda was on the line.

"Lothar!" She began, her voice trembling with emotion.

"What's wrong, Narda?" he asked.

"Jennifer's been kidnapped!"

His heart sank. "When?"

"Not twenty minutes ago. I walked in on the whole thing, but they put me out cold when I tried to interfere."

"The men. I would swear they were part of Mandrake's zombie brigade. They had that same look about them."

"I see," Lothar said, trying to stay calm. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"All right then. I'll tell Mandrake. Alec's on his way here from D.C. anyway. I'll tell him too, soon as he arrives. *You* call the police there and tell them whatever you can outside the realm of our investigation."

"Okay, Lothar. I'll call you back."

Mandrake emerged from the office.

"Nothing," the magician declared, slamming the door behind him. "His mind's too firmly tied up with whatever they did to him. I made the suggestion that he get up immediately and start a trip back to snow country. I planted the suggestion and triggered it, but he just sat there. He's in there now. Sitting."

"Well, I hate to add insult to injury, but I've got another piece of rotten news for you. Jennifer's been kidnapped. By 'robot men.' Narda got there a few minutes too late."

"Oh my God." Mandrake sat in one of the office chairs and buried his head in his hands.

Lothar continued, his voice soft and low-key now. "I told her to report it and to tell the police as much as . . ."

Lothar was interrupted by the door to the office. It opened abruptly and there in the doorframe stood Thom Burns, his eyes wide with the trance.

Mandrake looked up in amazement. Burns just stood in the doorway, staring into space, looking for all the world like a sleepwalker.

Lothar turned to Mandrake with a slight smile. "Maybe you weren't such a dismal failure after all."

Burns took a step forward.

"Maybe not," said Mandrake as he rose, glueing his eyes to Burns. "I'd better tail him, Lothar. He could be dangerous, right about now. If he's responding to my suggestion, it's a delayed, peculiar response. There's no telling what's going on inside that *pre*-programmed, *re*-programmed brain. You'll have to take care of Narda . . . and get a search for Jennifer started."

Mandrake's heart sank as he uttered Jennifer's name. This was what he had feared from the beginning. That Jennifer Lindsay's involvement with Agency—and with himself—would leave her vulnerable. He felt vaguely guilty. Now, of course, there was nothing he could do but entrust the search for Jennifer to Lothar. Thom Burns could be a walking stick of dynamite. Hundreds, even thousands of lives could be at stake. The magician had no choice but to follow the man in the trance.

Burns moved slowly across the hall and opened the door.

"Take it easy, Lothar," said Mandrake, moving to the door himself. He gave Burns a little bit of a headstart, deciding that it would be safer to follow him from a small distance. Then Mandrake pushed through the door and out into Wonderworld, where Thom Burns was headed for the parking lot.

IX

Mandrake had parked his sedan in the VIP area near the courtesy booth. Without taking his eyes from Burns for a moment, he got into the car and pulled it out into the lot itself.

The parking lot at Wonderworld was immense. It spanned two square miles of asphalt and was traversed, in Disney fashion, by a very sophisticated rapid transit system. But distance and monorail notwithstanding, Thom Burns walked, his eyes riveted ahead of him. His stride was direct, deliberate, and quick. He never looked back. Mandrake cruised behind at a safe distance. Finally, Burns came to a pale green Volkswagen van, stopped beside it, fished a set of keys from his pocket, opened the door, and got in.

Mandrake made a mental note of the van's license plate number, just in case he should lose the vehicle on their way to. . . .

Where?

The magician honestly had no idea. His mind flashed to Jennifer. What if this were all a wild goose chase? Suppose Thom Burns was so hopelessly gone from the psychic programming that he was merely about to drive around in circles? Or to smash into a tree? Perhaps he should have let Burns go, and concentrated on finding Jennifer.

But no, suddenly the image of an exploding roller coaster came into Mandrake's mind. And this image

was followed by that of an exploding ship. A beauty pageant in flames. A nuclear reactor.

No. These human robots were on a rampage of unthinkable violence. There was a question of priorities here. Lothar was more than capable of beginning an effective search for Jennifer. *Thom Burns had to be followed. The mayhem had to be stopped.*

As Burns's green van pulled out onto the highway, Mandrake was right behind.

It was a twenty-minute drive from Wonderworld to the nearest town, a nowhere-in-particular burg called Grayson.

Burns's van took the Grayson turnoff, and Mandrake couldn't imagine what the automaton could be up to. Still, he followed.

Thom Burns pulled the van straight into the center of the miniscule township and parked at a meter.

Mandrake parked across the lazy main street and watched. Burns walked into a store with a sign that read "Al's Stationery." Mandrake could see Burns through the window, as he bought something from the old man behind the counter.

Five minutes passed. Ten.

Burns just stood inside the stationery store. Mandrake grew concerned. Was it possible that the automaton *knew* that he was being tailed? Was it possible that he, Mandrake, was being set up by a man in his right mind, a skillful actor who merely *played* the role of a mind-controlled 'robot'?

The paranoia washed over Mandrake and then left him again. A large blue and silver bus pulled up beside Al's Stationery. Before Mandrake could do anything about it, he realized that Burns was boarding. *Stupid! You almost let him get away because you didn't realize a damned stationery store could be a bus depot in a town this size!*

Mandrake ran into Al's Stationery and quickly asked the man behind the counter where the bus that had just departed would stop next.

"Wilkie," the man told him. "Twelve miles down."

Mandrake flew to his car and burned rubber to Wilkie, where he had little trouble finding the local candy store, which served as a bus stop as well.

"Where does the next bus go?" he asked the counter woman.

"Goes a lot of places," she informed him. Helpful.

"Well, give me a ticket to the end of the line. The end of this run."

"That'd be all the way up to Snow Valley," she told him.

"That's it, then. Give me a one-way to Snow Valley."

He left the car in a public lot across from the candy store. When the bus pulled up, Mandrake was ready with ticket in hand. As he boarded the bus, Mandrake saw Burns seated at the back, staring out the window with his usual blank stare. The jaw hung open; the eyes were wide but empty. Anything human that might lurk behind them was buried so far down as to be useless. Burns had become a non-man, like the rest of his Navy-buddy-saboteur friends. He just stared out the window and did as he had been programmed to do.

Mandrake made no effort to hide himself from Burns. *After all,* Mandrake thought, *I did the re-programming. I made the suggestion. I said, "Take me there."*

The question now was simple. *Where? Where was he being taken? And to whom?*

Mandrake looked out the window and took in the changing landscape. Gradually, the apple trees became evergreens. Small white patches of snow appeared from time to time. Then larger patches. And finally, it was obvious they had entered a substantially higher altitude. A fine layer of snow completely covered the earth. In the distance, snow-capped peaks lined the horizon.

The bus made its first stop at a town called Elmore and among the passengers who boarded there was a pleasant, overweight woman in a blue coat. She asked Mandrake if she could use the seat beside him. He said of course.

"You look familiar," the large woman told the magician. "Are you a television star?"

"No," said Mandrake. This was his usual answer, although he was recognized more and more frequently these days, particularly after one of his tours or a TV guest appearance.

"Yes you are," the woman laughed. "I don't know which one, but you're a TV star. Going up to Hospital Row to visit a sick friend? Or are you taking the cure yourself?"

"I beg your pardon?" Mandrake asked, not believing what he had been asked.

"I'm sorry," the woman apologized. "I get carried away. Don't mind me."

"Where . . . what is Hospital Row?"

"You don't know?" the woman asked, chuckling. "Well then you must *not* be a TV star. Up north in Snow Valley there must be fifteen of 'em."

"Of what?"

"Hospitals," the stout woman replied, leaning in toward him confidentially. "Sanitariums, duckie. Private hospitals where movie stars and TV stars and politicians go to take the cure. To get off the bottle or the drugs or whatever it is they're on that month. There must be fifteen hospitals like that in the county. They call this bus the Loonybin Express." She laughed. "They say you see more famous people riding this bus to the end of the line than you see on the Universal Studios Tour."

"I get it," Mandrake laughed with her. But inside he started clicking. Sanitariums? Private hospitals? He looked back at Burns.

The zombie still stared out the window.

"You sure you're not famous?"

Mandrake turned to her. "I'm Mandrake the Magician."

The woman giggled. "And I'm Margaret Truman. No, you're not Mandrake. Him I saw on the 'Dinah' show not two weeks ago. He's much taller than you are. You can't fool me."

"Well, I tried," sighed Mandrake.

"Yeah, you did," said the woman, taking out her needlepoint and preparing to work.

Hours passed. The woman did needlepoint. Burns stared out the window. Mandrake waited. Finally, the bus took an exit marked "St. Benjamin." The stout woman looked up as the bus slowed down.

"This is the first hospital stop," she whispered to Mandrake. "There's two or three of 'em that use this St. Ben's stop. Look close to see who gets off here. I guarantee, there'll be . . ."

But the woman suddenly realized she was talking to herself. Mandrake had abruptly sprung from his seat. Burns was getting off the bus here, at St. Benjamin.

Outside, the bus stop was desolate, little more than a rustic log shack by the side of the road. Several taxis stood waiting to pick up passengers. It was snowing lightly.

Burns got into a cab. It pulled onto the highway.

Mandrake did the same, giving his driver orders to follow the cab that had just pulled out.

"Hey, what is this? 'Police Story'?" asked the incredulous cabbie.

"Just do it, brother," Mandrake told him firmly. "Don't lose that cab, hear me?"

They had followed Burns's vehicle for about five miles when it turned off onto a narrow country road.

"I don't know if I can make it up here, mister," the

cabbie complained. "If I get stuck, you're gonna have to pay to get me towed out."

"Just concentrate on that cab," Mandrake commanded. "You'll get more money for it than you're worth. Just don't lose that cab, got it?"

They drove up the narrow, path-like road. The wind blew, causing a fine patina of powdery white snow to shift across the gravel. Burns's cab didn't seem to be in any hurry. *A good sign,* Mandrake thought.

A few moments later, Mandrake saw a log tower up ahead.

"What is that?" asked the magician.

"Ski lift to one of those hospitals," replied the cabbie.

Burns's taxi stopped by the tower.

"All right, stop here," Mandrake told his driver when they were about twenty yards away.

"Sure, said the driver. "I guess that should be about fifteen bucks."

"A bargain," replied Mandrake, reaching into his wallet for some cash. He found two ten dollar bills and started to hand them up front to the cabbie. When the driver turned around to collect, Mandrake saw that he had a pistol in his hand.

"Keep the change, Mandrake," said the cabbie, leveling the gun straight between his victim's stunned eyes.

Simultaneously, the doors on both sides of the cab's back seat flew open. A man with a gun appeared silently in each. Mandrake recognized the one to his left at once. The other man was black and unfamiliar.

"Get him outside," commanded the cabbie. The man on Mandrake's left pushed his gun butt into Mandrake's side, forcing the magician to slide over. The black man to Mandrake's right grabbed his arm, digging hard into his bicep, yanking him painfully, powerfully out into the snow.

Free of the cab, Mandrake tried to run. He yanked

himself away from his captor and hauled back to deliver a punch. No sooner had he cocked his arm then he felt it grabbed by yet another set of hands.

They're everywhere!

The words flashed through the magician's brain just as the impact occurred. A hollow thud. Fierce, stabbing pain across the back of his skull. Bright light. Anguish for three seconds. Then dark descended. Mandrake crumpled to the ground. Unconscious.

Burns wiped the blood from the butt of his gun and stood staring at the man it had felled.

Now the man who had been driving Burns's cab emerged from his vehicle. He was a tall, distinguished-looking man with silver hair, not dressed like anything remotely resembling a cabbie. He wore a suit. And a fur coat to protect him from the cold.

"Nolan," he called.

"Right here, Romero." The man whose gun had pushed Mandrake out of the cab came forward. He had curly red hair, a thick carrot-colored beard, and hideous skin.

"Do you have your doctor bag, Nolan?"

"You bet," the man with the sickly complexion called. He moved to the trunk of Burns's cab, opened it, and pulled out a black medical case. From it, he procured a hypodermic needle and a vial of serum.

While the red-headed Nolan filled the hypodermic with fluid, Romero turned to Burns.

"Good work, Burns," he said, slapping the man on the back. But Burns was as oblivious to praise as he was to everything else. He continued to stare as the magician, moisture beginning to collect in the corners of his mouth.

The red-headed man with the bad skin rolled up Mandrake's sleeve and pushed the needle deep into a protruding vein in the magician's arm.

"Let's get him out of the snow," said Romero, once Nolan was finished.

"Right," Nolan replied.

Nolan, Burns, and their black accomplice loaded Mandrake's lifeless body into the ski lift. Romero stood a few feet back, observing with a smile.

By now it was snowing hard.

"AND NOW, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN . . . THE INCOMPARABLE MANDRAKE!"

He was backstage. He heard the words and knew he had to go out and perform, but he also knew that he wasn't prepared. Where was Narda? Where was Lothar? Neither were in their usual places. And the performance was beginning.

He was hot. He was burning up. The string that tied the black cape around his neck was suddenly choking him.

He heard the announcer repeat the introduction.

"THE INCOMPARABLE MANDRAKE!"

The audience was laughing. He had missed his entrance. He went out on the stage.

But they weren't human, this audience. They had human bodies and clothes, but they had animal faces. Dogs. Pigs. Monstrous, deformed animal faces. They snorted and wheezed and made vile noises as Mandrake tried to begin his act.

He had to close his eyes. He tried to concentrate. Maybe he could perform a few tricks and they would let him leave the stage. He opened his eyes and waved his hand to make flowers appear.

He realized now his arm was bleeding. A huge gash had opened in the flesh beneath his shirt and blood ran down his arm, soiling the white sleeve, staining the stage floor where it dripped. He tried to hide the bleeding limb behind his back and made a magic gesture with his other hand. . . .

He saw that it was bleeding, too.

He felt the pain. Both of his arms throbbed. He felt

life draining out of him. He screamed and looked up at the audience.

They were no longer animals. Now they were human. But their faces . . . their faces. . .!

The entire audience stared slack-jawed, exactly like the human robots who had been causing explosions. They all had "that look." The programmed, mind-bent, dazed, and terrifying look of the army of human automatons.

By now the blood had completely soaked Mandrake's shirt.

A voice from somewhere bellowed, "AND NOW, THE INCOMPARABLE MANDRAKE!"

"No," the magician screamed. "I'm bleeding! I can't!"

"AND NOW, THE *INEFFECTUAL* MANDRAKE!"

The voice was mocking him. In the audience, a million zombies laughed. Each one pulled out a stick of plastic.

"THE INEFFECTUAL MANDRAKE!" the voice repeated.

The zombies held their explosives high and suddenly, with a roar such as Mandrake had never heard, *everything* turned to flame.

The bloody shirt caught fire. The stage caught fire. The audience caught fire.

Burning. Burning.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN. . . ."

Sopping wet with perspiration, Mandrake opened his eyes. His sweat had soaked through the white hospital smock he was wearing and had completely saturated the starched white sheets of the institutional metal bed on which he lay.

The black man from before now wore a male nurse's uniform. He was in the process of removing a

hypodermic needle from Mandrake's flesh.

"What are you . . ." Mandrake could not even form a sentence.

The male nurse patted Mandrake's arm with an alcohol-soaked cotton ball, turned, and left the room, closing the door behind him.

The room was white. Mandrake could barely take it in, the light reflecting off the walls was so blindingly bright. A stark, white hospital room.

Gradually, bits and pieces of what had happened came back to him. At first, it was hard to separate the reality from the dreams. There had been so many dreams. He had lived a lifetime of dreams in the past. . . .

How long?

He had no idea how long he had been in this bed. It could have been hours. Or days. Or years.

He reached for the amulet he always wore around his neck.

It was gone.

Mandrake closed his eyes in despair and heard the voice of Theron, coming to him as clear as in life.

"Without the amulet, all that I have taught you, all your psychic powers, all of your magic will be as nothing."

Mandrake shut his eyes tight, trying to block out the terrible reality. He drifted back to sleep.

The nightmares that ensued were filled with terrible explosions and fires. Zombies like the living dead, marched throughout the world, incinerating everything of value. Jennifer Lindsay burned alive in the front car of a roller coaster. Mandrake was powerless against all of it, impotent in the face of destruction, unable to curb the mayhem that swept the earth.

And when he awoke, the male nurse was once again pumping fluid into his vein.

"What the hell is that?" Mandrake manged to ask.

The nurse did not reply. Mandrake turned his head to

get a good look at the black man's face. The expression he saw there sent a shudder of terror up his spine. It was the face of the saboteurs. The blank eyes. The mouth. The zombie nurse removed the hypo, dabbed a little alcohol on Mandrake's arm, and once again left the room.

The face had done it. Mandrake could not lie there and let the serum course through his veins, leading him to sleep and another series of perverse, hideous visions. He had to fight it. Perhaps if he moved around. Perhaps if he explored.

The magician fought to remain in control as delusions welled up before his eyes. Images of snakes and fire, tigers and blood. He blinked and tried to push them back to another part of his brain. A part he could control.

Mandrake could actually *feel* the injection creating nightmares, even in his waking state. He struggled with everything in himself to fend them off. To stay awake. To get out of bed.

He slid his feet over the side. The floor was cold. The tingling sensation in his soles helped jolt him into reality.

He tried placing some weight on his legs. They buckled. He forced himself back to his feet. He clenched his teeth and *commanded* his legs to support him. He sucked in an enormous breath and *insisted* of his muscles that they move, walk, animate him toward the door.

One step at a time, he was able to do it. The strength was coming back slowly; he could feel it. The motion helped free his mind of the injection's hallucinogenic effects.

He tried the door. Locked from the outside. He looked around the bare white room. Nothing. The place was plain as a prison cell, stark and absolutely empty except for the cold metal bed and the rack on which a change of white gowns hung.

The gowns gave him the idea. He reached back behind

his head until he was able to feel the point where the gown he wore had been fastened with a safety pin. He pushed the metal pin in on itself and removed it. Now Mandrake inserted the open safety pin into the lock on the door. Within seconds, his deft movements of the pin within the lock had picked the thing wide open. He could still perform a pretty smashing escape, if he said so himself. Mandrake pushed the door quietly ajar and stepped into the hall.

A long white corridor extended before him. It *was* a hospital. White on white. Everything pristine and crisp as it could be. Outside a window, snow was falling. And also through the window, Mandrake could see another wing of the building. It was crafted in the style of a Swiss chalet. Exactly like the building in Burns's vision.

A study in contrasts, Mandrake thought. Outside, a ski lodge. Rustic. Warm. Inside, a nightmarish hospital.

Someone was rounding the corner. Another male nurse. Same blank stare and half-drooling mouth as Mandrake's other caretaker. Mandrake knew better than to let this particular angel of mercy find him out of bed and casing the joint.

He ducked into the first door he could find and closed it fast behind him.

The room in which he now found himself was almost identical to his own. A stark white box with no window.

But there was also something in this room that did *not* exist in the room Mandrake occupied. In the center of the space, a human figure was seated in a wheelchair, his back to Mandrake. A man. Gray hair. He wheeled around now to face the magician.

The shock of recognition happened in an instant. "Dr. Lindsay!" The words came out in a hushed, breathless voice.

"Mandrake," the old man spoke. His eyes were less wild than they had been that evening at the Tahoe performance. The intensity remained, but Lindsay had

changed. He now appeared to be a man beaten into submission. "Mandrake, they have you too?"

"For the time being. How did you get here?" the magician knelt beside the wheelchair.

"It's . . . it's extraordinary. It is more complicated than I could explain in an hour, let alone the time they'll allow us now."

"They'll be in here to check on you?"

"Of course."

Mandrake had a chance to study the scientist's face and its wise, sad eyes. Suddenly, whatever suspicions he had harbored about Lindsay's complicity began to evaporate. He even felt slightly guilty about having wondered. He wished Jennifer were here.

Mandrake weighed whether or not to tell the old man about his daughter's abduction. For now, he decided, it was best to avoid it. The important thing at this moment was to get as much information as possible, before the men in charge of this nightmare returned.

"You died in an automobile accident last year." Mandrake confronted Lindsay with the statement. Simple. Direct.

"Part of an elaborate kidnapping, Mandrake." The scientist lowered his eyes. The memory was obviously painful. "They abducted me and brought me here to force me to work on their project. They wished to put my mind-control experiments to their own hideous uses."

"But the accident . . ."

"It was a patient here at the hospital who was in that accident. Which was no accident. The patient had died here of, I assume, natural causes. His corpse was planted in my car. A crash was rigged to make everything appear as if *I* had gone up in flames."

"But the dental charts. The X-rays used to confirm your death."

"You are dealing with very intelligent men, Man-

drake. Crafty, clever, intelligent men. If you plan something in advance, it is a small matter to tend to minute details . . . like switching dental charts and X-rays. Anything can be rigged and made to appear real if you plan it carefully and think it through. You are a magician. You're supposed to be an expert on that."

"What about Lake Tahoe? Jennifer received a message from you to meet her at the hotel where I was performing."

"That's right." The old man's face darkened. "Oh, I was sure I would get to you and everything would be all right. I was sure you would be able to help me. But I didn't plan on . . ."

"Wait. Slow down." Mandrake grabbed the old man's arm. "Take it easy and start at the top. They rigged the accident to look as if you were dead, and then they brought you up here?"

"Yes. They held me captive for a year. They forced me to work on my mind control experiments and to give *them* the benefits of my research. They put me to work on *their* project. And they used my knowledge for *their* own purposes."

Their project. Mandrake thought he understood, but he had to be certain.

"Their plans for Arkadian. The blackmail. The terrorism." Dr. Lindsay swallowed hard and struggled to continue. He was trembling. The man was, quite clearly, not in the best of physical or emotional health.

"I managed to escape at the end of nearly a year. I fled to Lake Tahoe, where I learned you were performing. I wanted to tell you what they were planning to do to Arkadian and his holdings. I wanted to tell you, so they could be stopped. I phoned Jennifer to meet me in Tahoe. But they got me before I could tell anyone what I knew."

"And planted their doctor to pronounce you dead in the showroom."

"Oh, Mandrake, they are *brilliant*. Truly. And that's why they are so unspeakably dangerous. They followed me to the auditorium where you were performing and they injected me with a curare solution. This causes heart and muscular relaxation that simulates death. It was a simple enough matter to revive me later in the ambulance."

Who are they, Dr. Lindsay?"

"There are three of them who are basically equal. Of course, William Romero is the real chief. He was a vice president of Arkadian's, but he was fired years ago. Since the day Arkadian turned on him, Romero has been planning this. He enlisted George Schultz, the security chief. And there is the doctor . . . I use the term very loosely. A scientist of sorts named Nolan."

"With red hair."

"That's him. You remember him from Tahoe."

With a sudden, hollow thud, they kicked the door open—Burns and the black man, both wearing male nurse's uniforms.

Burns rushed to Mandrake, seizing him by the shoulders. The magician shrugged to get free of the robot's vise-like grip, but found himself too weak. He strained against the beefy hands that held him as the attendant approached.

Mandrake strained his right arm back, clutching Burns's leg and digging hard into the muscle. He pushed out with the rest of his body. But Burns only moved his arm to the magician's neck and held the struggling Mandrake in a choking lock. The tendons in Mandrake's neck screamed for air.

The other attendant was now within two feet of the magician. He jackhammered a sadistically enthusiastic blow to the defenseless man's stomach. Mandrake doubled over, gagging from pain.

Another blow came crashing down on the back of his neck. The pain sent him all the way to the floor now,

where he lay dazed. He waited for the agony to end as the white leather shoes rammed into his side, his groin, his stomach . . . again and again and again. His body screamed to be left alone, yet his lips were silent.

Malcolm Lindsay could not watch. He closed his eyes and sat helpless in the wheelchair.

Burns and his accomplice now knelt beside the semi-conscious Mandrake. The black man drew a hypodermic syringe from the pocket of his white jacket. It was filled, poised, and waiting. As Burns held Mandrake's arm outstretched, the black man plunged the sharp silver needle deep into the muscular flesh of the magician's limb. He pushed down and watched the fluid drain into Mandrake's bloodstream.

Turning to Burns, the black man nodded. They scooped up the magician's limp form and together dragged it from the room.

Malcolm Lindsay buried his head in his hands. When the door closed behind the assailants, he began to weep.

X

The room spun as Mandrake regained consciousness. The inside of his head felt like cotton candy. His vision was in terrible shape. Mandrake squinted hard. There were faces floating in the white void before him. He recognized three of them: Schultz, Romero, and the doctor who had pronounced Dr. Lindsay "dead" at Tahoe—Nolan. Romero he placed merely from the mugshot in the dossier file Alec had sent to Hawaii. He would have known the distinguished features anywhere.

As for the other faces that spun before him, Mandrake now began to realize that they were repeats of the first three. He was experiencing double, triple, quadruple vision. He squinted hard once more, trying to bring the world into focus.

He wanted to reach for his amulet, not remembering that he had done so earlier in the day. And that it had been gone. But when his arm tried to make the motion, it could not. Mandrake looked down and saw that his entire body was swathed in white canvas. A straight jacket.

The faces that hovered over him smiled, each in his own peculiar way. Schultz's grin was that of a sadistic sergeant. Nolan's smile was simply hideous. His thin lips pulled back to reveal yellowing, corn-kernel teeth. Romero's gaze was smug and condescending. A self-satisfied look of triumph filled his countenance. In some way, Mandrake thought, Romero's was the most terrifying face of all. There was a genuine intelligence in his

face. And that meant a genuine threat. Genuine malevolence. Genuine danger.

Mandrake felt pressure on his left arm. He now became aware that someone had loosened the straps which bound him on that side and had exposed a patch of flesh.

The black nurse stood over Mandrake with yet another hypo. He brandished it like a magic talisman before plunging it into the magician's arm.

Mandrake forced a smile to match those of his captors.

"Don't you guys get tired of shooting me up with that junk?"

Romero's grin vanished. "No," he said softly.

"What the hell is it, anyway?"

Nolan spoke. "We are giving you drugs of a somewhat experimental nature. They provide a mild hypnotic effect to help improve communication."

"I'm communicating fine," said Mandrake. "Call him off."

"We'll have a lot of questions for you later," Nolan responded with an ugly grin. "I think the drug is advisable. It's my medical opinion that you should have it."

Medical opinion. Mandrake was ready to spit.

"You've already been a bad boy once today," added Schultz. "The drug will keep things pleasant, right Doc?" He turned to Nolan. "Won't it keep the party polite?"

"You should never have gotten involved with Arkadian," said Romero. "Never."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mandrake said, trying to bluff. "Last thing I remember I got off the train at Snow Valley for a weekend of skiing."

Romero threw his head back and roared with laughter. A diamond stickpin in his tie caught the gleam

of the fluorescent tube in the ceiling and flashed with malevolence.

"You'll have to do better than *that*, magician! Ski weekend indeed!" Suddenly, the laughter stopped. Romero leaned down and pressed his face just inches from Mandrake's. Mandrake could smell the mouthwash-scented breath and see the gold caps on the scrubbed, polished teeth as Romero spoke. No smile now. His lips curled with ugly seriousness.

"We know goddamned well why you followed one of our men here. You're in Snow Valley all right, but you won't be partaking of any winter sports. This is a private institution, Mandrake. And you're one of our most illustrious patients. Here to take a rest cure. Now let's get down to business. Is Arkadian forking over the ten million or not?"

"He hasn't got it."

Romero slapped Mandrake hard across the face. "Of course he's got it. Or he can raise it."

"He says he can't."

Now Schultz leaned down. His bulldog face was contorted with hatred for the man who had fired him. "Arkadian's a pig. A filthy, lying pig. He can raise that money if he wants to. And he's *gonna* want to when he finds out what our next target is gonna be." Schultz straightened up. "Should I make the call, Romero?"

"I'll make the calls, as always," said Romero. "Besides, there's time to alert Arkadian." He checked his watch. "Knox doesn't come on duty for another hour."

"Come on duty where?" Mandrake asked.

"At a nuclear power plant we've had our eye on," said Nolan calmly. "One of Arkadian's *bigger* projects."

"You've already got a man planted there?"

"How extraordinarily clever of you, Mandrake!" sneered Romero, running a hand through his silver hair. "Your psychic powers must still be in tiptop form, injec-

tions notwithstanding. What other vibrations do you get, Svengali?"

"That you kidnapped Dr. Lindsay and forced him to continue his mind control experiments so you could make full use of the men from Navy Project Long Beach. They'd already been primed for experiments like yours. And they worked out better than you could have dreamed possible. Mind-bent, automated robots. That's what you turned them into."

"With Lindsay's help," said Nolan. "We've kept him constantly perfecting the formula and whipping up new batches. Drug-assisted hypnosis is the key to the future, Mandrake. Under a trance induced by special injections, we were able to program our Navy friends *most* effectively. Each man was taught how to use explosives and given a target."

"And each was assigned a trigger phrase that could be phoned in to him to set him going," Mandrake said, helpfully.

Romero turned to Schultz with a smug expression. "He's good, isn't he?" Now he looked back at Mandrake. "You do very well, Mandrake. But all of this is just the beginning. A sort of dry run, you might say."

"I don't see anything dry about ten million dollars in extortion and a series of heavy-duty explosions."

"Compared to what we have in mind, ten million is pin money. Mind control is bigger business than Arkadian ever dreamed of." Romero turned to the black male nurse. "Isn't it, Mr. Kidd?"

Kidd, the black zombie, said nothing.

Looking at the male nurse, Mandrake was sickened by what they had done to the men from Project Long Beach. Cutter. French. Kevan. Burns. Now Kidd. None were responsible for the havoc they had created. And so many had died. Mandrake wondered how many people he didn't know had been the victims of William Romero and friends.

"Can you imagine what the KGB would fork over in return for one mind-controlled senator?" Romero continued. "We can program these men to specification. You order. We deliver. What do you think the Red Chinese would pay for a mind-controlled United States President?"

"How long do you think you can keep Dr. Lindsay up here, churning out the drugs you need?" The strait jacket bound his limbs, but his mind was beginning to get free. The information he was receiving was helping Mandrake to clear his brain. And it was racing.

"Oh, Lindsay's obsolete now," Nolan said matter-of-factly.

Mandrake looked up at the only man with the orange beard.

"Did you think we'd keep ourselves dependent on that fool?" Nolan went on. "We spent the past six months transferring his information to a memory bank. And in the last month or so, a genuine breakthrough has occurred in the good doctor's research. Drugs aren't needed anymore. Not since the new computer."

Romero gestured to Kidd. The black man brought a wheelchair into the room from the hall. Roughly, he pushed the strait-jacketed magician from the hospital bed into the wheelchair.

"If you'll follow us, please," Romero requested with mock politeness. It was a gruesome procession. Romero in the lead, followed by Nolan, Schultz, and the zombie who pushed Mandrake's wheelchair. They headed down the long white corridor, past Dr. Lindsay's room, and into an enormous white elevator.

The doors to the elevator snapped shut. There were only two buttons on the elevator controls. One was marked H. The other was marked L. It was the second button which Schultz pressed. The elevator began its ascent.

When the elevator doors opened, the five men made

their way down another long hall. A double door led them into a large laboratory. In the center of the gleaming white room, strapped to an operating table, was the figure of a woman. Lining the walls were endless feet of electronic hardware. The far wall was apparently the control center, a sophisticated panel as large as a movie screen, housing hundreds of rows of tiny colored lights. Beside it, on the room's east wall was a mind-boggling morass of wires and circuitry.

From this maze of electronic connectors another series of wires led to the table in the center of the room. Romero walked over to the table and wheeled it around one hundred and eighty degrees.

Now Mandrake could see the face of the female figure. It was Jennifer. She could not speak because her mouth was taped shut, but her eyes were screaming for help. Electrodes ran from her temples to wires which were connected to the computer wall. There were more wires taped to her arms, her chest, and her forehead. She was wearing the same kind of plain white hospital gown they had on Mandrake.

"We heard you two were close friends," said Schultz, leering at the magician. "We thought you'd like to see a demonstration of our computer featuring Ms. Lindsay."

"This isn't necessary," muttered the magician from his strait jacket.

"Oh, but it is," Romero interrupted sharply. "You see, Raymond Arkadian is still insisting he can't raise the ten million. We think perhaps he'll need persuasion from someone he trusts. Someone like *you*, Mandrake. You're about to call Arkadian and tell him to fork over the money. And at the same time, I think, *you'll* inform dear Mr. Arkadian of the next phase in our program."

"The nuclear power plant," Nolan chimed in.

"We'll place the call for you, Mandrake," said Romero with a gesture toward Kidd. The black man stepped forward carrying a white telephone. "And just

to make sure you don't say any more or any less than we want you to, Jennifer Lindsay will be wired to our fabulous new computer. She will be receiving hypnotic suggestions from the computer *while* you are talking to Arkadian. One word about who we are or where we are and little Ms. Lindsay will receive some suggestions you won't approve of at all. Some rather *rude* suggestions, eh Nolan?"

The "doctor" was double-checking the electrodes connected to Jennifer's skull.

"How can a computer perform hypnosis?" Mandrake asked, trying to sound surprised. In fact, he knew perfectly well. It was simply a matter of reaching a frequency that was in harmony with Jennifer's brain waves. The electrical impulses from her brain and the electrical impulses from the machine would, in a sense, mesh. The computer's "thought process" could then *replace* Jennifer's. How? The computer could translate the verbal commands of its operator into electrical signals. And these could be directly transmitted to Jennifer in the language of brain waves. It was all possible . . . and Mandrake had to stop it. The magician's mind turned to one of his forerunners. Harry Houdini. His fingers strained inside the strait jacket. Carefully, imperceptibly, his fingers went to work.

"No need for us to explain the details to you, Mandrake," said Nolan.

"You just make the phone call and mind your own business," laughed Schultz.

Kidd wheeled in a small table and set it next to Mandrake's chair. On it were a little electronic device that would clip over the telephone's receiver to disguise the caller's voice, and a specially constructed shoulder clamp to hold the phone up to Mandrake's face while his arms were bound in the strait jacket.

Inside the jacket, the fingers continued to fly. Tiny, quicksilver gestures. Minute, careful gestures. The

progress was slow, but the magician continued to work.

Romero clamped the electronic device over the phone receiver. "Testing," he said into it. The voice that came out was easily recognizable as the voice which had been making the threatening calls to Arkadian.

"A nifty device, wouldn't you say?" asked Romero.

"No, I wouldn't," said Mandrake softly. Still, the fingers worked.

Kidd clamped the phone-holding device to Mandrake's shoulder. When the receiver was placed in the saddle, Mandrake would be able to speak into the phone without holding it.

"You guys think of everything." Mandrake's hands were sweating with anxiety. The perspiration helped lubricate his skin for the escape routine. He kept at it. These things couldn't be rushed. He knew that. But there was simply no time.

Romero dialed and held the electronic device firmly over the telephone receiver.

Nolan walked to the wall with the lights and began adjusting knobs. A high-frequency noise began to fill the room, barely audible but firmly present, vibrating in the air. Nolan adjusted another dial and the noise became slightly louder. Jennifer reacted to it on the operating table. Every muscle in her body tightened as if she were experiencing electric shock.

Romero spoke into the receiver.

"Raymond Arkadian, please."

Nolan turned the knob up high. The ultra-high frequency sound grew more intense. Jennifer's body twitched spasmodically.

"Arkadian," Romero began, "there is someone here who wants to talk to you. I think you'll recognize his voice immediately."

Romero ripped the electronic device from the receiver and shoved the telephone into the cradle on Mandrake's shoulder. But as Romero's hand withdrew from the re-

ceiver, he was caught off-guard by one hundred and seventy pounds of pressure, tackling him, pushing him to the ground.

Mandrake had hurtled forward, knocking the telephone receiver from his shoulder to the floor. He thrust his entire weight at Romero's knees, grabbing them as in a football game, and sending the mastermind sprawling.

Mandrake scrambled to his feet. Summoning every ounce of his strength, he lifted the wheelchair high over his head. Exhaling with a wordless cry, he heaved the heavy metal object at George Schultz, toppling the man with its impact. When Schultz was down, Mandrake turned to see Kidd.

The black man lunged forward. The magician raised both his arms high over his head, locked his hands together and sent bone-crushing force cascading down through his descending limbs. They shot down like an axe chopping wood and hit home on Kidd's left shoulder to produce a violent spasm and a terrific yelp of pain. The karate maneuver completed, Mandrake delivered a severe kick to the man's groin.

Kidd answered with a scream of agony and doubled over. With a roar of rage and hatred, he forced his wounded body upright and pulled back to land one jaw-shattering blow on the magician's face.

Mandrake took the punch and felt his face swerve hard to the left. But before Kidd could land a second punch, the magician had leaped into the air and sent himself flying at the black man's stomach—feet first. The flying kick, a tactic the magician had learned in the Himalayas, not only took Kidd by total surprise—it leveled him. The giant automaton fell to the ground in a heap. Mandrake turned around to find Jennifer.

He was staring down the barrel of a gun. He would have given *anything* to be wearing the amulet about now. Without it, his magic was unusable.

"Don't move," Nolan commanded. "I promise I'd

just as soon blow your head off as breathe!"

Mandrake had nothing to lose. He hurled himself forward, directly at the weapon.

With one good whack, he knocked the red-haired doctor completely off balance and sent the gun tumbling to the floor. Nolan bent to retrieve it, but was far too slow. Mandrake was atop the weapon, seizing it, and aiming.

"All right," said Mandrake, breathing hard. "The keys." He leveled the gun at its erstwhile owner, panting, struggling to regain his air supply. "The keys to the laboratory! Now!" The magician bellowed the words, causing Nolan to cringe in fear.

From the floor, where Romero was barely conscious came his cry: "Give them to him, Nolan. Go on!"

Nolan pulled a large set of keys from his pocket.

"Toss 'em, move it!" commanded Mandrake, edging the gun slightly forward, a threat.

Nolan threw the keyring at Mandrake, who caught it with his free left hand. "Now, over with your buddies. On the floor. Face down." He kept the gun trained on Nolan as the scientist did as he was told.

When all four of them were gathered in an area Mandrake could cover comfortably with the pistol, he backed up toward the operating table.

"Just take it easy, Nolan. All four of you, just stay right where you are." The magician slowly made his way to the table where Jennifer lay, his eyes never leaving the four men, his gun trained on them constantly.

When he arrived at the operating table, he stripped the tape from Jennifer's mouth and loosened the straps.

"You ready to go?" he asked her.

"Thank God you're here," she breathed, hardly able to speak. Together, they pulled the electrodes which had been taped to her temples, arms, forehead, and chest. Free of the wires at last, she stepped down from the table.

Mandrake stood between Jennifer and the four men as he carefully backed up toward the door. The gun remained trained on Schultz, Romero, Nolan, and Kidd. Jennifer opened the door to the operating room and stepped out into the hall. Mandrake quickly ducked out behind her, pulling the door shut as he did. Out in the hall, he quickly inserted the key in the lock and double-fastened the heavy metal door.

"Get into the elevator and press H," he told her. They made a quick dash for the elevator, Mandrake speaking as they ran. "That lock won't hold them long. Once Kidd recovers, he'll be able to kick it down with a little help from Schultz. We'll have to get out of here fast."

"I'm right behind you," Jennifer told him, pulling the hospital gown around herself modestly. "Right behind."

"Do you know where your clothes are?" The elevator had arrived on the hospital level.

"There's a locker area down this hall," she told him. "It's where they brought me before they gave me a room."

"You were here all the time?"

"I didn't know they had you either. I nearly died when they wheeled you in a chair. I thought maybe they'd crippled you."

"Not yet," said Mandrake. "Let's get a move on."

They ran down the hall to the room in which Mandrake had found Malcolm Lindsay earlier that day. He threw the door open.

There, in the center of the room, sat Malcolm Lindsay, exactly where Mandrake had seen him last.

Jennifer gasped audibly when she saw her father. He was so changed. The beard, for one thing. And he looked older. Tired. Ill.

"Dad?" she said softly, trying not to burst into tears. Lindsay looked up. Shock registered on the weary, beaten face.

"Jennifer." And he did what she had tried hard not to

do. Tears rolled down the pale cheeks immediately. His daughter rushed to his side.

"Oh, Dad." She pressed her head against his. "Thank God, you're here. I kept begging them to tell me if they had you . . . if you were alive."

Mandrake stood in the doorway to the room, watching the hall and the elevator door.

"I'm sorry, but you'll have to have the reunion a little later. Dr. Lindsay, can you walk?"

The old man hesitated. "I don't know. I . . . I." He paused. "Of course I can. I'll just need a little help."

Jennifer pushed the tears back with her fist. She breathed deeply, struggling to remain control as Mandrake moved to the wheelchair.

"We'll support you," said Mandrake. "The chair will end up slowing us down outside. Just try to give us a hand getting the weight up."

"Oh, it isn't as bad as all that," Dr. Lindsay insisted. But when Mandrake and Jennifer stood on either side of him and began to help him up, it was clear the old man was very weak, perhaps even in pain.

"What did they do to you?" Jennifer asked quietly, trying hard not to allow the tears to return.

"It doesn't matter now," said Lindsay. "We've got to get out of here."

"Amen," Mandrake chimed in. "First stop is that locker room. We're all dressed a little skimpily for ski country." Supporting Dr. Lindsay between them, Jennifer and Mandrake moved out of the hospital room and into the hall.

"The lockers are through that door, I think," she said, gesturing to a white metal door to their left. Inside the room, there were, indeed, rows of gray lockers. Hanging on several of them were white hospital robes like the ones Jennifer, Mandrake, and Dr. Lindsay were wearing. Jennifer began slamming rows of gray metal boxes open and shut.

"I don't see my clothes," she called.

"Just grab anything," Mandrake answered, as he, too, began opening and closing lockers in a search for something in which to face the cold. "Anything to keep you warm," he commanded.

Mandrake breathed a sigh of relief as he opened the twelfth metal cubicle. There, neatly folded, were his clothes. And there, suspended from a hook, was the amulet. Inside, he smiled. "It pays to be stripped and changed by a robot," said Mandrake under his breath.

"What?" called Jennifer, still searching for her clothes.

"Never mind." But Mandrake was relieved that Nolan, Schultz, and Romero had not been the ones to help him into a hospital gown. Only one of their automated lackies would have been dense enough to miss the importance of Mandrake's amulet. Only one of those "living dead" would have left the powerful talisman nonchalantly hanging in a footlocker. Mandrake lovingly replaced his amulet around his neck. He knew now they would survive this ordeal. Somehow.

"Just grab anything," Mandrake called, "and something for your father. They'll be coming after us any minute."

Dr. Lindsay was seated on the bench in the center of the room. Suddenly, he pointed up and exclaimed. "Blankets!" Atop the lockers, dozens of white blankets were stored in folded splendor.

"Grab 'em," cried Mandrake. "Let's go!" He hoisted himself up on a locker shelf, so that he could reach the white woolen protectors. He pulled down several of them and tossed them to Jennifer. "Just use these!"

Jennifer placed a blanket around her father's shoulders and draped another one around her own.

"Okay," she smiled. "I'm ready."

Mandrake carefully opened the storage room door. He poked his head out into the hall and looked both

ways. The gleaming corridor was empty.

Mandrake and Jennifer supported Dr. Lindsay between them once again and started down the corridor. Halfway to the end, they saw that it was intersected by another hall, this one painted gray—and at the end of the gray hall was the thing they had been looking for. An exit.

Through the glass in the exit door, Mandrake could see a parking lot. "Out here," he said, steering them toward the door and finally through it.

Outside, the crisp mountain air brought all three of them a new sense of vigor. Mandrake and Jennifer saw two cars parked in the lot. They checked. Both were locked. Lindsay leaned against the building.

Suddenly, the doctor heard footsteps coming from inside the hospital. He turned his head just in time to see Schultz, Romero, and Nolan heading down the gray hall.

"Mandrake! They're coming!" he cried.

Mandrake spied a snowmobile parked just at the edge of the lot. "Jennifer, get in!" he commanded, gesturing toward the tiny vehicle. He glanced toward the door and saw the three men headed down the hall toward them.

Jennifer ran to the snowmobile and jumped in as she had been told. Mandrake hoisted Dr. Lindsay onto his shoulders and carried the elderly man to the vehicle, depositing him inside. Next he drew his gun and fired two shots, picking off one tire on each of the two parked cars.

Mandrake climbed into the snowmobile as Schultz, Romero, and Nolan came bursting through the hospital doors.

Gun shots.

They were armed!

"Duck down!" Mandrake cried, pushing Dr. Lindsay's head down. Jennifer followed suit. Mandrake realized he had no ignition keys for the snowmobile.

The three gunmen were getting closer. A shot whizzed past Mandrake's left ear. He felt the wind and realized that death might be centimeters—or moments—away.

The magician reached below the dashboard of the snowmobile and located two loose wires. With one hand he pressed them together, while he touched the amulet with his other.

"*By the eternal powers of Theron the Master*!"

At once, the snowmobile kicked in. Mandrake turned the wheel wildly, as the machine accelerated and spun out over the grounds.

Schultz, Romero, and Benton piled into one of the cars in the parking lot.

As they sped away, Jennifer looked back. The three men were still sitting in the car. They were about to discover that one of its tires had been completely demolished by Mandrake's gun. They weren't going *anywhere*. She couldn't help laughing.

"What's so funny?" Mandrake asked.

"They're helpless. You did it!" she exclaimed, clutching her father's arm. "Their car is useless, Mandrake. You got them."

"Not quite yet, Jennifer," the magician told her as they sped past fir trees and fences in the gallant little snowmobile. "Right this minute there's a robot working at Arkadian's nuclear power plant near Cypress Falls. And said robot is about to cause a nuclear explosion that could reduce this country to forty-nine states again."

"My God," Jennifer grabbed her father's arm tighter.

"What are you going to do, Mandrake?" Dr. Lindsay asked.

"I'm going to drop you two off in town to get the police. Tell them exactly what happened and get them started out to the hospital to claim those clowns. Meanwhile, I'm going to head for the power plant. Jennifer . . . you're to call Alec Gordon at a number I'll give you

in San Francisco. Tell him what happened and where I'm headed."

"Is that all?" she asked.

"No, there is one more thing I think you'd *both* better do."

"What's that?" asked the Doctor.

"Pray I get to that power plant before Romero's boy has done his job."

The snowmobile sped on into the chill mountain night.

XI

Alec, Lothar, and Narda stood just outside the enormous chain link fence. Inside the fence was a massive poured-concrete structure, all built on one floor except for the tower which rose up from its center. A phallic gray hexagon, it rose some twelve stories tall: a bizarre skyscraper in the middle of nowhere. A large and powerful nuclear reactor.

The Agency chief and Mandrake's two assistants stood craning their necks, peering at a black speck in the sky. Gradually, the speck grew larger and the whirring of a motor became audible. The helicopter began its descent.

Several minutes later, Mandrake emerged from the chopper. He looked at the power plant, silently taking in the remarkable height of its central tower.

Alec marched over to where Mandrake stood gaping.

"Jennifer called. The police got Schultz, Romero, and Nolan at a roadblock when they tried to get away from the hospital."

"Good," said Mandrake, preoccupied. His attention was totally fixed on the gray monolith that pierced the calm blue sky. It was taller than he had expected. "What kind of hardware's inside there?" he asked.

Lothar overheard the question and jumped in. "Liquid-metal fast breeder reactor. The manager estimates there are about two tons of uranium and plutonium inside the reactor vessel right now."

"Which means if we're in trouble at all, we're in trou-

ble *big*," Narda noted. "Hi, chief." She nodded at Mandrake. "Haven't seen you in a while."

Mandrake gave her a quick smile before returning his gaze to the towering reactor. "I wish we could have met under more pleasant circumstances."

"Don't over-react, Mandrake," said Alec. "Between us, I don't think a damned thing's gonna happen. First of all, we've quadrupled security around the plant. No way one of your robot saboteurs is gonna get in there without a lot of people knowing about it."

"You don't understand, Alec," said the magician. "He could be in their right now. They planted a guy here. He could have *started* already. . ."

Before Mandrake could speak another word, a security man came running up to the gate. "Mr. Gordon! Alec Gordon?"

"What is it?" Alec turned around.

The security man was ashen with terror. He could barely speak. "You said to alert you to any developments. They've spotted a man inside . . . near the reactor! Near the controls!"

Alec turned to Mandrake. "Follow me." He started for the building—Mandrake, Lothar and Narda following. When they reached the concrete doors, security held them up. Alec produced clearance for all of them; within minutes they were inside.

The power plant was lighted with blue fluorescent tubes. An eerie glow reflected from white concrete walls and floors, making the entire place seem like something out of the year 3000. To add to the illusion, a soft, strange whirring noise was omnipresent. The sound of myriad tiny motors, working in unison. The sound of energy. Of power.

The security man led them through a maze of concrete and cinderblock passageways, all lighted with the same blue tubes. Finally, they came to an enormous air-pressure sealed door. The security man paused and turned to

a huge white metal wheel on the wall, using both hands strenuously to turn the wheel.

The dense portal opened slowly. Once they had a foot through which to pass, the party entered the next room. The security man closed the door with a wheel on the opposite side.

Inside this inner chamber, the whirring noise was louder. The air felt suddenly cold. The security man gestured straight up.

Where the ceiling should have been, an empty space soared up twelve stories—so tall in contrast to the low ceilings elsewhere, it seemed to extend endlessly toward heaven. The space was five sided and lined with catwalks spiralling up to the very summit. The effect was dizzying. And in the center of this soaring hollow tower was an enormous hexagonal concrete enclosure, which extended up the full twelve stories. At various levels along its height, pipes, tubes, cables, and hoses pierced the concrete hexagon and extended through it to the surrounding walls. A tall, thin ladder clung to the hexagon, extending up the entire way. This was the nuclear reactor.

"Up there," the security man said suddenly, pointing to a small figure on one of the high catwalks. "That's him."

Mandrake stared up at the man in silence. He was so far up, the magician couldn't discern the color of the uniform, let alone the expression on the face. Yet Mandrake knew everything he needed to know about this man.

"His name's Knox," the security official volunteered. "He's been working here since we opened. And then, suddenly today, he's bezerko. We tried to get up to him, but he's got a gun. He won't let anybody within fifty feet."

"He's been working here since the plant went into op-

eration?" Mandrake asked, eyes still glued to the man on the catwalk.

"Yup. Six years."

"And before that, I'll bet he put in some time in the Navy. Right?"

"Yeah," the man answered. "As a matter of fact, I think he. . ."

"Keep everybody off of those catwalks," Mandrake commanded suddenly. "I'm climbing up."

Mandrake didn't have time to use the catwalk for his ascent. He pulled himself up the terrifyingly thin, straight ladder.

It was quite a climb. And every second of it, Mandrake knew, brought the possibility of a holocaust a little closer. As he climbed, Mandrake observed the saboteur's method of operation.

Knox was planting a plastic device at selected intervals along the entire height of the reactor. Obviously, he had already finished planting explosives along eight full stories. He was working on the ninth.

The magician climbed as fast as he could. His palms grew sore against the metal rungs. His arms and shoulders ached from pulling his weight. Yet on he climbed relentlessly. Only now did Mandrake realize the enormity of the situation. The fallout from an explosion here could poison an entire state, could kill off thousands in an instant. No disaster in the history of the nation could compete with what would happen if this baby went up. The *Seaview* affair suddenly seemed like child's play. The Scream-In seemed an ironic game. This was the big-time. Havoc. The stakes had never been this high.

Mandrake was sweating.

"Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party." Richard Knox's lips moved silently, forming the words as they flashed through his mind in numb-

ing repetition. They made his tedious work go faster. Each plastic device had to be hooked up at exactly the right location, fitted with a detonation device, and connected to the wire system that would eventually run the entire length of the reactor, leading to a little black box. When Knox got to the top, he would hold this little black box in his hand. This little black box that contained the ultimate connection. The button that would set all of the bombs off at once. The one Knox himself would press into service when all the connections were ready.

He looked forward to that—to pressing the button and watching everything go up in a grand cloud of blue smoke. He didn't mind going with it, so long as he lived to see the moment of ignition. He longed to see the smoke. He longed to see the tower break apart like a child's building-block house. He had to see it come crashing down. He was ready.

He connected the eighth device and continued up the catwalk. "Now is the time for all good men. . ."

Mandrake continued his climb. As he passed the seventh story, he saw one of the plastic devices up close. Know had planted it at a spot along the spiral catwalk close to the ladder.

Mandrake examined the explosive. No timer. He looked to the side of it—all over. *There was no timer*!

Mandrake couldn't believe it. Could Romero have mis-programmed his most important saboteur? Could Knox have been improperly prepared for his mission? Was he planting explosives that could never go off?

And then Mandrake noticed the micro-thin wire leading from the plastic. He saw that it extended, connecting all of the explosives. And that the end of the wire was with Knox!

Mandrake quickly realized what was about to hap-

pen. This operation was to have a manual trigger. And Knox would hold the fate of the power plant—literally—in the palm of his hand.

In his mind, Mandrake ran through his alternatives. Yes, he could inch along the catwalk and undo the explosives one by one, disconnecting each from the trigger wire.

But Knox would see him. And before he could get them all undone, Knox would have ample time to explode the explosives at levels higher than the one at which Mandrake worked.

No, the only way to fight this thing was to disarm Knox himself. To keep the man from pressing the button.

Knox was on the ninth-story catwalk when he realized someone was coming toward him. He pulled his gun and steadied it to fire.

Mandrake touched the amulet around his neck.

"*By the eternal powers of Theron the Master*!"

Knox's attention was diverted. A loud, hissing sound brought him whirling around.

An enormous snake, its head the size of a bull, was coiled around the catwalk rail! The mammoth tongue came shooting out of the gigantic, fanged jaws. It almost touched Knox on the shoulder.

Knox froze in terror.

He pumped three shots into the snake's mouth, but the monster did not disappear. The saboteur started to climb higher, to the next level.

"*Now is the time for all good men. . . .*"

Yes—good men had work to do. There was no time to worry about a snake. No time to worry about fear or danger or anything else. Good men had work to do. Good men were going to die anyway. Soon. Fast. In a blaze of glory and an explosion like heaven coming to

earth. He clutched the black box in his hand.

Knox arrived at the tenth level.

Only to see that Mandrake had arrived there first.

"Knox," the magician began carefully, "I want you to give me the black box. Give me the end control for the wires. You don't want to set it off, Knox."

"I DO!" the saboteur screamed, his eyes mad with rage and confusion. "GET DOWN! LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Knox leveled his gun at Mandrake's chest.

An ear-splitting roar. A golden lion, five feet tall, stood between the magician and the saboteur. The mouth opened, revealing teeth like knives, each shining one dripping blood. The animal sprang at Knox who emptied a shot into the air, just as the illusion disappeared.

The lion was gone. Knox didn't see the magician anywhere.

Then he felt the hands on his throat. Mandrake held him in a lock from behind.

"Drop the gun, Knox."

The saboteur held the gun tighter.

"Drop it, damn you!" Mandrake squeezed. He would kill him with his bare hands, if he had to.

But the gun went clattering to the catwalk.

"All right," said the magician, letting loose. "Now take it easy."

Knox whirled suddenly and took desperate, powerful hold of Mandrake's neck.

Mandrake struggled to pry the strangling hands loose, digging his hands deep into Knox's biceps. But Knox clung tighter.

Mandrake was choking, gasping for breath.

"LEAVE ME ALONE!" Knox was screaming as he increased the pressure of his grip on the magician's throat, forcing Mandrake to his knees.

Knox followed the magician down onto the catwalk, which gave Mandrake leverage he hadn't had while standing. The magician threw his weight forward and tumbled over his attacker. The two men rolled together on the precarious metal walkway. It shook with their weight.

Now Mandrake was on top. He smashed Knox in the jaw. A geyser of red spewed from the saboteur's mouth.

Knox dug his fingers into Mandrake's shoulders, pushing back with all his strength.

Mandrake smashed the saboteur's nose like so much china. More blood. The magician's white shirt was smeared with it.

It looked as if Knox had been subdued. Mandrake, panting, sweating, lifted himself to a standing position. He looked around for the explosive and control. He saw the last plastic device with the wire leading away from it. But he could not locate the black box that was to set off the devices.

He continued to scan the catwalk for the box. And then he heard a thumping sound—*footsteps on metal*!

Mandrake turned around.

Knox stood behind him with a crazed grin smeared across his bloody, throbbing face. His mouth hung open in the slack-jawed manner of his brother saboteurs, but his eyes smiled in triumph. He was breathing so hard his body heaved violently with each inhalation.

In his hand he held the black metal box. Mandrake glanced around and saw that it was connected.

Knox had not reached the top, had not installed all twelve devices, but he had put nine in working order, and he held the detonator in his hand!

Mandrake touched the amulet.

Knox laughed insanely and held the black box high. "*By the eternal powers of Theron the Master*!"

A ball of fire appeared in midair, hovering before

Knox at shoulder height. The saboteur could feel heat on his face and shoulders. He was almost blinded by the brightness of the flames as they burned like a meteor—like a tiny sun, suspended in midair, just in front of his face.

A strangled, whining sound came from Knox's throat as he raised an arm to shield his eyes from the ball of burning gases. The detonator was still in his hand. He had to set it off. Fire or no fire. He had to.

"Now is the time for all good men. . ." Knox looked for the button.

The fireball came closer, about to singe the flesh of his face. Knox was blind before the flaming globe. He took a step backward.

The ball of fire kept coming toward him, glowing brighter, burning hotter.

Knox began to sweat. He could feel the heat of the fireball coming for him. He would be burned alive! He searched the detonator for the place to press. He turned it over and over in his hand, but the fire was blazing too brightly in his eyes. . . It was moving toward him. He could not see.

He stepped back another step.

The ball of fire kept moving closer to his flesh, threatening now to incinerate his hair. He felt the heat grow more intense.

He stepped back another step.

It came closer.

Another step.

Another.

Now he was pressed against the metal rail of the catwalk. He was bending backward as far as he could to avoid being burned. The detonator was still in his hand. He wanted to press it but couldn't see. . .

The ball of fire flared up, suddenly.

Knox screamed.

In a fraction of a second, he realized what was happening. He had leaned back too far to avoid the ball of flames and gases. . .

And he fell. His body flipped backward over the rail and began a quick nine-story descent through space. The detonator flew from his hand, the wires disconnecting themselves from the black control box, unraveling like party streamers.

And still he fell, seemingly weightless as a leaf on the wind. Down seven stories . . . eight. . .

When the impact occurred it made an awful, liquid, squashing sound. And the white concrete floor was suddenly spattered with brightest red.

What was left of Richard Knox would not take long to clean up.

On the catwalk, nine stories in the air, Mandrake the Magician slipped to his knees, exhausted. He had saved the power plant. And he had sent the last of the saboteurs sailing to his death.

In silence, the magician buried his head in his hands. Several minutes passed before he began the long climb down.

TONIGHT ONLY!
LAST WEST COAST PERFORMANCE PRIOR TO NATIONAL TOUR!
THE INCOMPARABLE MANDRAKE

The sign, in gold letters, sat outside the Lake Tahoe showroom. Inside, Mandrake the Magician was finishing his act.

Narda stepped forward in her sequined leotard as the audience finished applauding the previous illusion.

"Mandrake thanks you," she said modestly, with a little bow.

Lothar smiled from the wings, where he had been

watching the show. Mandrake had given the performance of his life tonight. Whatever he would do for a finale *had* to be pretty spectacular.

"And now, Mandrake is proud to announce his Grand Finale!" said Narda with a flourish. She stepped back a few paces and Mandrake took center stage. He held up his hands to stop the applause, but the audience continued to go wild.

"Just one volunteer," he said.

Several women in the front row started waving their arms and screaming, "Me, me, me," but the suave figure in the black cape just smiled and looked straight past them.

"There, at that table. Young lady, would you mind helping me?"

Mandrake pointed to a very attractive lady at a table in the second row. Jennifer Lindsay.

Jennifer, her father, Alec Gordon, and Raymond Arkadian were all seated around the table finishing their coffee. Tonight had been a special celebration. Not only was the recovery of Dr. Lindsay an occasion to mark, but Raymond Arkadian had announced a special ten-year grant from his foundation to the Lindsay family. Their research into parapsychology and occult science would be well-supported for at least a decade to come.

But now Jennifer was being summoned to the stage. She didn't want to go.

"Go on, Jenny," her father urged.

"I'll make a fool of myself, Dad. You know what a klutz I am. I don't dare."

"Just go on," coaxed Raymond Arkadian with a smile.

"Oh . . . all right." Jennifer stood up and the rest of the audience applauded. As she made her way to the stage, she only spilled one man's coffee for him. And she only tripped slightly.

Once Jennifer was onstage, Mandrake signaled for the

audience to be quiet. Narda stepped forward to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Mandrake will now perform his world-famous disappearing feat." She moved to the side.

The Oriental music that was the act's trademark began. A scent of incense wafted over the room. Wind chimes sounded somewhere in the distance.

Mandrake spoke to Jennifer under his breath, so the audience wouldn't hear. "Just relax," he told her.

"How can I relax up here in front of all these people?" she whispered, a smile plastered on her face for the public.

"You won't be up here for long," he retorted ventriloquist-style, without moving his lips.

"I haven't even had dessert," Jennifer pouted, the fake smile still smeared across her lips for the audience.

"You will. How about having it at my hotel suite? In about thirty seconds?"

Jennifer turned to him in surprise. He winked at her. She smiled back warmly.

"Make it twenty seconds and you're on," she whispered seductively.

"I'll make it ten," he said, raising one hand to the amulet. "*By the eternal powers of Theron the Master.*"

In a puff of smoke, Jennifer Lindsay disappeared.

The audience applauded like mad. They whistled and stamped and shouted. They tore the place apart. Mandrake drank in the response warmly, bowing once. When he straightened up, he touched his amulet again.

"*By the eternal powers of Theron the Master.*"

There was a second puff of smoke. When it cleared, Mandrake the Magician had vanished into thin air.

The audience went crazy. Stamping, clapping, cheering like crazy.

"We want Mandrake! We want Mandrake! More! More! Encore! Encore!" The shouts filled the Lake Tahoe showroom, vibrating the chandeliers, echoing off

the walls. "Encore! Bravo! Encore!"

But Mandrake the Magician did not return. Not tonight.

Not even for one more bow.

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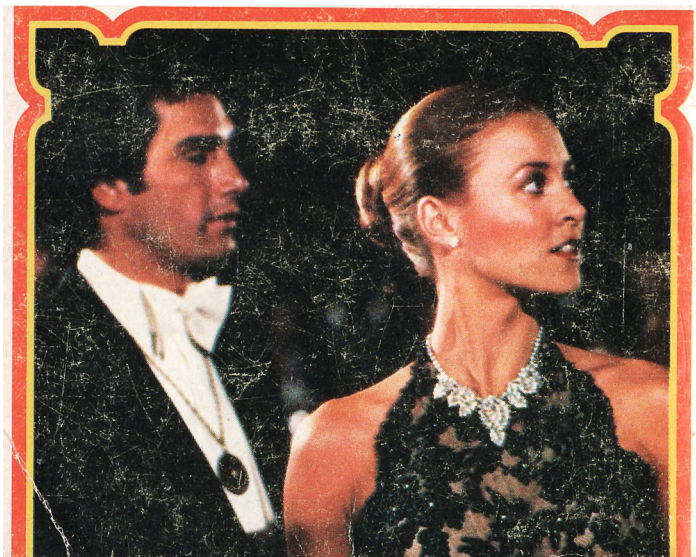

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